

# The Policy Analytical Capacity of the Government of Quebec: Results from a Survey of Officials<sup>\*</sup>

Luc Bernier<sup>(a)</sup> and Michael Howlett<sup>(b)</sup>

(a) ENAP, Quebec City, PQ. [Luc.Bernier@enap.ca](mailto:Luc.Bernier@enap.ca)

(b) Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC. [howlett@sfu.ca](mailto:howlett@sfu.ca)

<sup>\*</sup> This article originally appeared as Bernier, Luc, and Michael Howlett. "La capacité d'analyse des politiques au gouvernement du Québec: Résultats du sondage auprès de fonctionnaires québécois." *Canadian Public Administration* 54, no. 1 (2011): 143-152.

**Abstract.** This article complements the work of Howlett et al. on the capacity of Canadian governments for public policy-making. The new public management wave was driven by the notion of a need for improved service delivery to the population. A number of authors, including Metcalfe, pointed out that the government was then neglecting management in favour of "policy advice." It was fashionable to show interest in policy but not in management. After decades spent seeking greater efficiency, have we gone too far in the other direction? Do governments have the capacity to develop public policy? Have those responsible for developing public policy received the training they require? This article addresses the Quebec portion of a set of Canada-wide surveys on the capacity for public policy-making. It complements the earlier analyses by presenting the results of a survey conducted among public servants in Quebec. We place particular emphasis on education and the training of the public servants who work on developing and formulating public policy.

**Keywords.** policy capacity, policy analysis, Quebec.

This article completes the work of Howlett and his colleagues on the capacity of Canadian governments to elaborate public policies.<sup>1</sup> While there is a large literature on the role of public policy analysts in national governments, few large scale surveys exist on the subject and even fewer at the level of sub-national or provincial governments. Moreover these works only rarely deal directly with the capacity of governments to create policies (Howlett and Newman 2010).

In the 1980s and 1990s, new public management reforms took their spirit from the idea that improved service delivery to the population was necessary. Certain authors like Metcalfe underlined that, at the time, the state often neglected management and favoured the provision of "strategic" policy advice. The state was often seen to be interested in policy and not management. After decades of research on efficiency, however, have we pushed too far in the other direction? Do public administrations have the capacity to formulate effective public policies? Have those charged with developing policy adequate training to do so? This article

**Résumé.** Cet article complète le travail de Howlett et collègues concernant l'aptitude des gouvernements canadiens pour l'élaboration des politiques publiques. La vague de nouveau management public était portée par la notion d'un besoin visant à améliorer la fourniture de services à la population. Plusieurs auteurs, incluant Metcalfe, ont montré que le gouvernement négligeait alors le management, au détriment du « conseil en matière politique ». Il était alors couru de montrer de l'intérêt pour la politique, mais pas pour le management. Après des décennies passées à chercher à être plus efficace, avons-nous été trop loin dans cette direction? Les gouvernements ont-ils la capacité de développer des politiques publiques? Ceux qui sont chargés de développer des politiques publiques ont-ils reçu la formation nécessaire? Cet article se penche sur le segment québécois d'un vaste questionnaire canadien sur la capacité d'élaboration des politiques publiques. Cela complète les analyses précédentes en présentant les résultats d'un questionnaire mené parmi les fonctionnaires du Québec. Nous soulignons l'importance de l'éducation et de la formation des fonctionnaires qui travaillent pour développer et formuler des politiques publiques.

**Mots clefs.** capacité politique, analyse des politiques, Québec.

presents the Quebec portion of a set of pan-Canadian surveys on policy capacity in governments. It completes the analysis by presenting the results obtained by a poll of Quebec officials. We are interested, more precisely, in understanding the university education and later training received by those officials who participate in the creation and formulation of public policies. In an epoch where financial pressures on governments limit their ability to develop new policies and where existing policies often must be adapted to cover new challenges, whether officials have the training, time and resources necessary to develop policy is a key question.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to know exactly how many Quebec officials work on the development of public policy or to identify policy workers in Quebec government from publically available sources as the method used to classify jobs does not allow this. To overcome these problems, we first sent our survey to the Secrétariat du Conseil du Trésor who responded that they too did not have a list

allowing the identification of those officials who worked in this area. We then worked with members of research and intelligence units with relative success. Depending on the minister, members of such units could be responsible for policy but they could also work in communications. We also wrote to all Deputy Ministers who relayed our request to their subordinates. In the end we had 86 persons completing the survey and 44 partial completions. Three hundred and twenty six people in total visited the survey website. This can't be described as a scientific survey sample in the classical sense but the results are nevertheless very interesting. They permit the comparison of the situation in Quebec with results already published on the other Canadian governments.

The presentation of results below follows the order of the questions in the survey itself. As is shown in Table 1, the respondents to the survey were unequally divided across ministries. It is interesting in a qualitative sense to determine how our request was treated, which allows for the contextualization of the responses. One official of the Treasury Board Secretariat told us by e-mail that it was impossible to respond to the questionnaire. In another e-mail another at the Ministry of Revenue told us that he did not make public policy. These varied interpretations of what constitutes a public policy are interesting in-themselves. The classic definition of a public policy given by Thomas Dye is that it is what a government decides to do or not to do about a problem brought to its attention. In this sense all the ministers and organizations that generated responses make public policy, even the Treasury Board Secretariat where public service human resources policy is decided such as, for example, how to develop exams in which applicants from ethnic communities can become officials.

As is shown in the table below, no one in the Executive Council responded to the poll but a respondent who worked on the aboriginal policy file and eleven on intergovernmental relations can be thought of as operating at the centre, rather than, for example in ministries like agriculture. We present our findings below and then comment on these in the conclusion.

**Table 1. In Which Ministry do you Work?**

<i>In Which Ministry do you Work?</i>	
Municipal Affairs, Regions and Land Occupancy	1
Employment and Social Solidarity	8
Family and Seniors Affairs	5
Finance	1
Justice	1
Agriculture and Fisheries	15
Economic Development, Innovation and Export Trade	1
Immigration and Cultural Communities	1
Quebec Health Insurance Board	1
International Relations	3
Natural Resources	1
Revenue	1
Health and Social Services	2
Treasury Board Secretariat	5
Public Security	1
Quebec Housing Corporation	1
Tourism	3
Transport	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>

## Who is involved with public policy-making and where?

The officials and functionaries who responded are classified in Table 2. Certain officials in what is referred to as "class 4" can be described as senior officials. Many experts said they were at the "18th level". The first column in Table 2 sets out the original responses obtained and the second our reclassification. Among those who answered this question there were 49 professionals and 18 officials. Seventy-two men and 36 women responded to the survey or, respectively, 67 and 33 percent of respondents.

These officials all worked in Quebec except one who was based in Manitoba. Seventy-five percent had never worked outside the country, 54 percent never outside the province. Eighty-five percent worked daily in the capital and 13 percent in Montreal. Between 80-90 percent never went to another region than Montreal.

**Table 2. Job Classifications**

<i>Classification Levels</i>	<i>Respondents' Choice</i>	<i>Re-Classified</i>
Socio-Economic Planning Officer/Researcher	9	}
Professional	9	
Senior Professional	5	}
Distinguished Professional	3	
Expert Advisor or Professionnel Expert	22	}
Engineer	1	
Director	5	}
Manager class 4	7	
Manager class 3	3	}
Director-General	1	
Manager Level 2	1	}
Executive	1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>18</b>

Contrary to the situation with service delivery, then, public policy work is done at the centre. However, 65 percent of respondents dealt with the federal government at least once a year and 24 percent on a monthly basis. As for the other provincial governments, 49 percent dealt with them annually and 11 percent on a monthly basis. Two hundred and thirty-five respondents had contacts with foreign governments. And 51 percent took part in interministerial or intergovernmental committees.

Not all of these respondents were young: 43 percent were over 51 years of age. Only 29 percent were less than 40. Eighty-four percent worked in a unit charged with developing public policy. They also had experience: 64 percent had worked on policy issues for at least five years and 42 percent for more than 10 years. They worked in all sectors in which the Quebec government was involved. Ninety-two percent were employed fulltime.

They were quite stable in their organizational locations: 60 percent having worked six years or more in their existing agency while 43 percent anticipated still working there in six years or more time. They did not think the retirement situation would much affect their units in future years. These units were small: 78 percent counting ten employees or less.

## The Nature of Policy Formulation Work

The terms “advisors” or “analysts” best describe most policy formulation work. In third place are tasks of “co-ordinators”, then “planner” and “director”. Many tasks are undertaken: planning, preparing ministerial documents, research and analysis, budget preparation, proposing policy options.

In short, formulation is a varied task. These tasks also vary in frequency. It is relatively rare for activities to be undertaken on a daily or weekly basis. Twelve percent collect data every week, but none negotiates every week with central organizations. It is more surprising to find that 35 percent never interact with program managers and 41 percent never deal with policy implementation. Formulation and policy management thus appear to be quite different activities. In the case of program managers only 30 percent undertake these two activities. About 20 percent undertake a range of tasks linked to policy formulation at least once per year. More conceptual tasks like research, information collection, and evaluation are undertaken by close to 30 percent at least once a month and, for an equal number, on a weekly basis.

Fifty-five percent never take part in consultations with the public and 32 percent only once per year. This percentage falls to 18 percent for those who interact with interest groups. Analysts also spend more time with subordinates or superiors: 64 percent create briefs with their subordinates on at least a monthly basis and 52 percent with their superiors. They also inform decision-makers at least once a month in 64 percent of cases. Analysts also work less on evaluation: 29 percent indicated they had never undertaken an outcome evaluation while 33 percent never evaluated a policy process. Forty-one percent and 43 percent, respectively do so only once per year.

Among the available techniques, brainstorming (76 percent of respondents), expert consultations (70 percent), and scenario analysis (73 percent) are the most popular, followed by consultation exercises (61 percent) and stakeholder consultations (55 percent). Forty-seven percent undertake cost-benefit analysis and 30 percent risk analyses. Markov chain and Monte Carlo techniques were not utilized.

The tasks which most concerned respondents were policy analyses (69 percent), elaboration of policy (67 percent), decision-making (52 percent), interest group consultations (56 percent), formulation of options (49 percent), editing reports (43 percent), presenting them (37 percent) and environmental assessments (34 percent). Questions linked to human resource issues were the least cited.

The obstacles which analysts faced in policy formulation were principally a short-term work orientation (50 percent), inadequate resources (35 percent), and inadequate time (32 percent). After that were listed insufficient delegation from the centre (20 percent), lack of support from the minister (19 percent) and the fact that the centre ignored their expertise (18 percent).

## Recruitment and Training

Among Quebec officials who had experience in formulating policies, only 7 percent had worked for the federal government, 7 percent for another provincial government and 5 percent for another country. Twenty-seven percent had worked for a non-profit and 19 percent in the university sector. Fifty-eight percent had worked in another government ministry; which indicates a high level of mobility.

These individuals were trained in universities: 57 percent completed a bachelor’s degree and 41 percent a graduate degree. For those who would like to know in what field, it was quite varied: 15 percent in management, 11 percent in public administration, 16 percent in political science, 18 percent in economics, 14 percent in geography, 8 percent in law. Seventy one percent had never taken a university course in policy formulation and 73 percent never one in policy analysis. Forty-seven percent had taken some in-house training, 50 percent took part in workshops and 71 percent took part in conferences

Sixty-eight percent of officials judged that additional professional training in policy would be useful. The subjects they felt would be most useful were an introduction to policy-making, using evidence-based policy-making and internal and external policy formulation. They were clearly less interested in learning about report-writing, and financial management.

## The Nature of Work

This deals with the question of what kinds of tasks most occupied analysts at the provincial level on a day-to-day basis. These were mainly focussed on the local level as the international level remained a lower priority. Pan-Canadian issues also occupied little of their time.

Government priorities structured more of their time than public concerns. If daily and weekly responses are combined in order to best understand the core concerns of analysts’ work, government priorities were cited as most important by 43 percent of responses versus only 11 percent for public pressures and one percent for the results of public consultations. Moreover, 34 percent of issues required co-ordination with headquarters against 18 percent with other government organizations. For 45 percent of the issues dealt with on at least a weekly basis policy-relevant information was not immediately available. Fifty-eight percent of issues dealt with on a weekly or daily basis did not have a simple solution.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents said they had to respond to emergencies every day or every week. Fifty-four percent said they were occupied on at least a weekly basis with tasks that could be resolved in less than a month. Tasks which took longer to resolve were rare.

Respondents were asked “by whom are you consulted” ? The response was: above all by my minister’s office, rarely by central agencies and only a few by other ministries. The promotion of policy analysis was diffused through their ministry; most felt that analytical quality had not changed

much over the years and possibly in the direction of a slight improvement in quality, despite available resources having diminished over the past five years for the majority of respondents.

When we asked what they thought of the engagement of their minister in policy formulation, they were very positive, but weaker in terms of financial support and, above all, as far as the number of employees available is concerned, this was found to be hardly acceptable. They also estimate that training is insufficient with respect to the processes of policy formulation. Overall they judged as 'weakly favourable' the analytical capacity of their ministry.

## Perspectives on the Formulation Process

Quebec officials are in agreement with the idea that the short term trumps the long-term in priority. They estimate that they rarely consult the public in their formulation work, but take more account of political aspects. They also state that policy analytical capacity has not improved and that it requires more interaction with other governments. The work requires greater technical expertise. They consider policy analytical capacity to be an internal governmental matter and not an external one, even taking into account the growth in influence of interest groups. They also feel central agencies should play a greater role in co-ordination. In response to one question on the subject, a strong majority felt that evidence is required to support policy formulation.

On the other hand, the respondents are also of the opinion that a greater involvement of the public would make policies more effective – like by integrating interest groups and/or working in networks with other government ministries and non-governmental organizations. They feel that a reduction in the size of government would have little impact on policy effectiveness but that more control from the ministers' office would help. This is also true of access to more information and relevant facts – through the creation of policy units or the support for more personnel.

According to 25 percent of the sample, the greatest challenge to be overcome by managers in order to improve analytical activities concerns the lack of time and resources needed to develop quality analyses. The second challenge mentioned by nine percent was the focus on the short-term ; and the third – mentioned by seven percent - is the lack of effective multi-sectoral policy-making and insufficient information sharing. Inadequate training was mentioned by six percent.

## Evidence-Based Policy-Making

Seventy-four percent of officials who responded to the survey said that the use of evidence-based policy-making is not an idea with which they are familiar. The further analysis of responses in this area about how evidence is used is thus difficult to interpret. While evidence-based methods are little known, officials are favourable to using quality information to guide their work. They also frequently access, as

necessary, government experts as well as, less frequently, non-governmental experts and, the least frequently, independent experts. Officials often use diverse information sources, principally personal experience, but also university research and scientific research or that provided by industry or by other governments. The proof they prefer for policy formulation is research on best practices and consultations with interested parties. In decision-making, consultations with interested parties is key, rather than consultations with ministries or headquarters. In policy implementation, again, it is consultations with interested parties, research results and best practices research which are central. As for policy evaluations, it is above all information on policy outcomes which counts and, again, consultations with interested parties as well as national and international studies.

## Conclusion

The first conclusion to note relates to the difficulties encountered simply in identifying the persons dealing with public policy in the Quebec government. This is a matter of how the management of public service personnel is conducted. The portrait of who does what in government is often information collected by unions in preparation of collective bargaining. Why doesn't the state do this? It seems to us that this kind of management information is very useful. Future manpower needs in this area could be better defined as a result.

Another more methodological element to consider is the possibility of excluding the Ministry of Transport from the survey results. It is surprising that so many people who completed the survey came from that one department. Another element to take into account is the translation of the survey instrument. The translation was faithful to the spirit of the English-language survey in order to preserve comparability, but some words in French were too open to interpretation by respondents. One can take, for example, the use of the word "national".

Because of the limited number of respondents we also did not examine several issues which could have been addressed with a larger response rate. It would be interesting to know if, for example, it is the younger officials who have experience in the non-profit sector because employment opportunities were more limited upon their arrival on the labour market. Always a function of age, are training levels higher among younger people? These data, and others, could then also be linked to other research utilizing the same survey in order to extract more meaning. At first glance, there are no contradictions in the survey. The answers are consistent.

The weak links between government officials responsible for policymaking and the public, however, is a surprise. Should we view Quebec policy-making as occurring in a vacuum? This represents an intriguing finding from this survey - considering the weak interaction that seems to exist between the center and the direction of public policy - with the center defined as central agencies or branches of ministries. Policies are developed in specialized units concentrat-

ed in Quebec City by officials relatively advanced in their career, whether managers or professionals. They have rarely been specifically trained in policy analysis at the university. The survey provides a portrait of a government weakly organized to articulate public policy, however, it operates within the context of numerous other policy organizations. The survey would have to be repeated within government and non-governmental organizations, and thus require substantial resources, in order to generate a clearer picture of policy work and policy workers in Quebec and in general. It is clear from this survey, though, that the resources devoted to public policy in government are limited, the ability to think long term is rare and therefore the ability to develop public policy is often more deficient than optimal in nature.

In summarizing the views collected, we would argue that with respect to public policy, it should be possible for the Government of Quebec to do better. Beyond the fact that resources are scarce, it should be possible to develop a longer-term perspective. We can also infer from these data that the time available to deal with public policy is often too limited. The survey results also indicated that the Government of Quebec, like other provincial governments, is better organized to provide services than to develop policy. The data collected in the Quebec case confirms the situation that exists elsewhere in Canada on the sporadic nature of the attention given to public policies and their often more reactive than planned nature (Howlett 2009: 11). In this sense, the new public management has done its work.

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