

Beyond consultocracy and servants of power: Explaining the role of consultants in policy formulation

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Abstract

Prior research on consultants in policymaking described their expanding policy involvement and impact. This research focuses on consultants' policy formulation roles and on how and why these roles vary across jurisdictions and contexts. It draws on comparative research on healthcare policy in Ontario, Canada, and Victoria, Australia. Based on analysis of contracts and expenditure data, and 59 semi-structured interviews, this research finds that consultants in Victoria are partners in formulation, used routinely for a variety of tasks, including core formulation work. Their role is institutionalized through formal and informal rules. In contrast, consultants in Ontario perform non-core formulation work and are primarily active in linking the government to other sites and pools of knowledge. The paper ties this variation to public sector internal capacity and policy sector complexity. It offers new empirical data and provides a nuanced understanding of the roles of consultants in policy formulation.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Governments use consultants for policy formulation (defining a policy problem and developing and matching policy alternatives) in various policy areas and jurisdictions. It is important, then, to understand consultants' formulation roles and their impact. This paper explores, analyzes, and compares consultants' formulation roles in two health policy subsystems: Ontario, Canada, and Victoria, Australia. It contributes to a nuanced understanding of governments' use of consultants

for formulation, and of how and why this use varies across jurisdictions. The research draws on interview data and quantitative analysis of consultancies contracts from the two jurisdictions. It finds that governments take different approaches to using consultants in formulation. Consultants can be institutionalized in core formulation work and involved in policy formulation throughout. In such cases, they routinely develop policy alternatives, manage procedural aspects of formulation, and provide symbolic capital to policy proposals. Alternatively, they can support policy formulation from the outside by linking the government to other actors and pools of knowledge. These positions, while interrelated, have different implications in terms of consultants' direct policy impact, the democratic deficit associated with their use, and long-term impact on public service capacity and status. Relying on comparative analysis, the paper suggests that these roles are shaped by public service internal policy capacity, and by fragmentation and complexity of the policy sector. Both factors are associated with long-term legacies of public sector reforms, which differed materially in the two cases.

2 | CONSULTANTS AND POLICY FORMULATION: THEORY AND CONTEXT

With the rising complexity of policy problems and material changes to public services' internal capabilities, the use of consultants by governments has steadily increased. New Public Management (NPM) and subsequent administrative reforms, have left public sectors "smaller and more complex" (Taylor, 2000, p. 47; see also: Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), with a need for external support in policy formulation, governance, and implementation. This trend has received attention in research in recent years. We know that governments use consultants for policy advice and ideas (Jupe & Funnell, 2015; Keidar, *forthcoming*, 2018; O'Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016). In many cases, they hire them to facilitate consultation with stakeholders (Scott & Carter, 2019; Vogelpohl, 2018; Weitkamp & Longhurst, 2012); or to analyze the policy field (Bortz, 2019; Hurl, 2021; Vogelpohl et al., 2022), sometimes replacing public service own analytical policy capacity (Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019). And various studies suggest that governments use consultants for policy legitimacy (Jupe & Funnell, 2015; Momani & Khirfan, 2013).

Studies have also suggested hypotheses to explain variation in the volume of consultants' use by governments across jurisdictions. Saint-Martin (2017) ties such variation to production regimes (Liberal Market Economies [LMEs] and Cooperative Market Economies [CMEs], Hall & Soskice, 2001). In LMEs, where firms rely on the market (rather than the government) for capital investment, they create a need for accountancy firms to audit and measure performance. This contributes to a large consulting industry, pushing consultants' supply side (see Saint-Martin, 2004; Steiner et al., 2018). Sturdy and O'Mahoney (2018) suggest that major state restructuring reforms, drive an expansion of local consultancy industries since they create a demand for these services. And van den Berg et al. (2019) suggest that administrative traditions (Westminster-style systems compared to Weberian and consensus-driven systems) are likely to explain variation in reliance on consultants in policy advice. How these mechanisms operate, and how the use of consultants varies across jurisdictions, still demand more explicated study.

To support the study of consultants' roles, this research conceptualizes two types of policy formulation roles. Drawing on the mainstays of policy formulation research in policy sciences, it distinguishes between "core" policy formulation roles and non-core formulation roles, termed here "linkage". Core policy formulation work includes generating policy options, weighing them in consideration of policy problems, and refining alternatives with consideration of

stakeholders' preferences (see: Howlett & Mukherjee, 2017, p. 7 on "actual formulation work", and Colebatch, 2006; Nekola & Kohoutek, 2017). It can also include formalization of proposals into legislation or cabinet decisions. Core policy work involves access to the policy network: "those who actually make policy" (Howlett et al., 2020, p. 93), such as senior bureaucrats or elected officials, or their staff. It thus includes process work, such as facilitating policy proposals among decision-makers (see also: Thomas, 2001).

The second type of formulation policy work termed here "linkage", consists of supporting formulation from outside. It includes responding to specific, well-defined data needs and expertise or capacities lacunes. It includes limited direct interaction with and inclusion in the policy network. The term "linkage" captures this type of work: connecting the government to other pools of knowledge and expertise; or other policy actors, such as service providers or target populations. In this role, rather than having direct impact on the chosen policy course, consultants are utilized to expand the government's reach to areas in the subsystem; or to specific areas of knowledge, that, unlike policy analysis, are outside the immediate realm of government expertise. While their access to the policy network is limited, in linkage work consultants are placed in a liminal space, between the government and the broader policy subsystem. They mediate relationships, knowledge, and policy preferences between the government and different actors and sites (on consultants as liminal actors, see: Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Medvetz, 2012; Seabrooke, 2014).

Importantly, these two types of roles place consultants in different positions in terms of direct impact on formulated policy. When active in core policy work, consultants can directly shape the policy substance, the policy instrument choice, and its application. Their access to the policy network moreover places them to exert influence on senior officials or their close circle. In contrast, in linkage work, consultants' direct impact on which policy alternative is selected (what the government chooses to do) is less pronounced. Nevertheless, as studies on consultants recently demonstrated, in linkage roles they may well have impact in defining the boundaries of the policy discussion, amplifying some voices over others in policy deliberation, or importing specific policy approaches and rationalities from expertise fields (Gabriel & Paulus, 2015; Hurl, 2018; Vogelpohl, 2018; Weitkamp & Longhurst, 2012). These two types of roles are interrelated, and their boundaries can vary in different contexts. Nevertheless, there is important analytical distinction between them, that stems from how we understand formulation as a policy stage, its core activities, and its main actors. Variation in these roles among different jurisdictions and entrance of consulting firms to core policy formulation (work which was considered normatively and theoretically as inherently governmental (Boston, 1994; Halligan, 1995)), demand more study and explanation.

Different types of roles for consultants, as described above, are likely to be related to public service capacity. A decline in in-house policy-relevant analytical capacity is likely to produce a need for consultants in core policy work, as others have suggested (Althaus et al., 2021; Craft & Halligan, 2020; van den Berg et al., 2019; Walter et al., 2020). More specifically, consultants are likely to assume core policy roles, in response to the many analytical policy capacity gaps left by public sector reforms. This is also related to the complexity and fragmentation of the policy sector, and the reliance on delegated and complex service delivery modes, which increases the number and types of actors pertinent to formulation (Taylor, 2000). This complexity creates a need for consultants for process and coordination purposes (exacerbated by capacity shortages) and increases the need for external legitimacy for policy.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN, CASE SELECTION, AND METHODOLOGY

This research uses an in-case and comparative analysis design. In-case analysis is used to identify and characterize how governments use consultants in formulation, and the comparative analysis exposes sources of variation. Canada and Australia were chosen as “most similar systems” design (Lijphart, 1971). Both are liberal welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990), LMEs (Soskice and Hall, 2001), and rely on Westminster politico-admin tradition (Halligan, 2020; Harding, 2004). Their liberal market characteristics produce an extensive local consulting industry (Saint-Martin, 2017). These similarities limit external variation and allow focused study of the variation of interest: consultants’ formulation roles and their sources; and important background conditions, such as changes in capacity and long-term legacies of public sector reforms.

This research takes the policy subsystem as the level of analysis. In any given consultancy project, consultants can be used for various tasks. To discern a more permanent role, the focus here is, rather, on continuous role patterns within a given context. The focus is on health policy within the last decade. Health was chosen because it is a major area of social policy, facing transformation and challenges in developed countries, thus providing a ready context for the need for external policy support (Tuohy, 2018)

The research is based on analysis of contracts and expenditure data,¹ and on 59 interviews with senior and mid-level bureaucrats and consultants (some with experience in both industries) in both jurisdictions: 34 in Ontario and 25 in Victoria, held between October 2020 and November 2021. The author identified participants through background research, including firms’ websites, ministry/department websites, organizational charts, and a “snowball” method, once interviews began. The distribution of interviewees based on affiliation is detailed in Table 1 below:

Due to covid-19 pandemic travel and in-person meeting restrictions, interviews were held by online conference technologies: Zoom (49) and Microsoft Teams (6); or by phone (4). 52 interviews were recorded, while in 7 the author took notes by hand, at participants’ request. All recorded interviews were automatically transcribed by Nvivo12 auto-transcription services, and transcriptions were checked against original audio files by the author. Following each interview, the author produced a brief interview reflection, identifying salient themes. These were later used to produce a coding scheme. Transcripts were coded using Nvivo12. The research received ethics clearance from the author’s institution’s ethics research board.

Interviews were chosen as a primary method because of inherent opaqueness of public data on consultancies’ use and spending. They provided information on the process of policy formulation in each jurisdiction; the content of consultancies; their perceived impact on policy; the rationale for their use as described by civil servants; their self-perception of their role; and other aspects that arose in further conversation. While interviews provide important data and insights, their pitfalls include issues of recalling information, exaggeration on the interviewees’ side, and confirmation bias on the researcher’s side (Berry, 2002; Harvey, 2011). To counteract some of these problems, questions on content and impact of consultants’ work were posed both for consultants and their clients, discussing similar projects, to allow for triangulation. Additionally,

TABLE 1 Number of participants based on their affiliation

	Ontario	Victoria
Public servants	15 (2 former consultants)	10 (3 former consultants)
Consultants	19 (3 former bureaucrats)	15 (5 former bureaucrats)
Total	34	25

whenever possible, interview data was corroborated with publicly available data. The author relied on governments' audit and public commissions reports, relevant Ministry/Department annual reports, consultancies reports, and other relevant documents.

4 | FINDINGS: CASE STUDIES

4.1 | Consultants as partners in formulation: Victoria, Australia

4.1.1 | Victoria: Consultants' use background:

Governments in Australia use consultants extensively in policy formulation and implementation (Dent, 2002; Phillimore & Arklay, 2015; van den Berg et al., 2019). In NPM reforms in the 1990s and 2000s, consultants were influential in developing and implementing reforms at the commonwealth and states levels (Dent, 2002; Goldfinch & Roberts, 2013). Over the last 15 years, there has been significant rise in the use of consultants by the federal government, in tandem with long-term decline in-house staffing in the Australian Public Service (APS) (van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 96). A recent independent review of the APS expressed concern about this trend and the associated loss of core policy capabilities within the APS (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019, pp. 351–352).

4.1.2 | Victoria: The local policy context

Understanding the specific policy context is important to analyzing consultants' roles. Policy formulation in health in Victoria involves a multitude of stakeholders, and accordingly, conflicting interests. This complexity is inherent to public health systems (Howlett et al., 2009; Howlett & Ramesh, 1998; Rothgang et al., 2005); but is unique in Victoria, which has a devolved healthcare system. It lacks a midlevel, regional organizing body (such as the LHINs in Ontario, see below), leaving the state DHHS (Department of Health and Human Services²) to directly coordinate its local health boards and service delivery (Fenna et al., 2021; Ham & Timmins, 2015). Additionally, healthcare policy formulation and implementation in Australia rely on multi-level governance, involving states and commonwealth governments (Fenna et al., 2021; Gleeson et al., 2009). This contributes to system fragmentation and complicates policy formulation (Hughes et al., 2015). This complexity can create, as demonstrated below, multiple entry points for consultants into policy, where external legitimacy and coordination resources are needed.

4.1.3 | Victoria: Consultants' role in policy formulation

Consultants in Victoria, this study finds, are active members of the policy network, and their work pertains both to core and linkage policy work. Utilizing Victoria's categorization of consultancies, Figure 1 below shows that about half of consultancy work commissioned by DHHS is dedicated to “policy” and “program advice and delivery”, with another quarter dedicated to evaluation:

Consultancies under the “policy and program advice and delivery” category include, for a few examples, contracts titled “Policy Program Advice and Delivery to the Royal Commission to

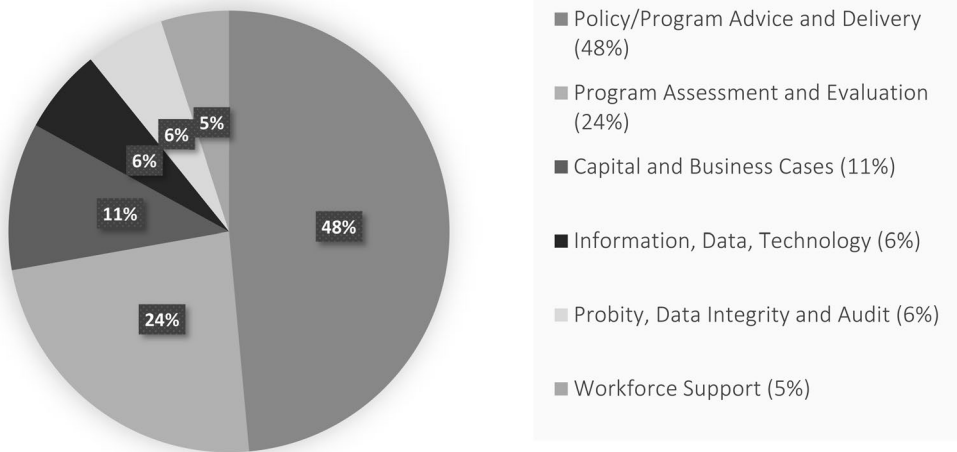


FIGURE 1 Consultancies contracts, 2018–2020, as categorized by Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Victoria, Australia (*source*: Author's compilation based on Victoria government data DHHS, 2020). $N = 241$

the Mental Health System” and “Statewide Mental Health Demand Modeling” (both awarded to KPMG), “Review of Victorian Funding Model for Small Rural Health Services” (awarded to Aspex consulting) and “Health Workforce Strategic Planning Processes” (awarded to Deloitte), all indicative of potential direct involvement in policy alternatives development. This involvement was echoed in interviews. In response to questions on the type of tasks consultants perform, policy analysis was mentioned by 73% (11 out of 15) of current consultants interviewed and by 50% of current public servants (5 out of 10), and policy advice by 47% (7 out of 15) of consultants and 70% (7 out of 10) public servants. One senior public servant said: “consultants are doing probably just about everything. Even [the work] of setting strategic directions and working on big policy pieces” (Interview, 2021a). Another senior public servant said that “we’ve had consultants... developing [policy] strategies, actually taking the policy question, making the question, and moving it all the way through legislation” (Interview, 2021b). These quotes provide insight into the broad involvement of consultants in defining policy problems and developing alternatives.

This use of consultants by Victoria Public Service (VPS) prompted the State Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet to observe “a tectonic shift in our operating environment as public servants... [it] includes a contestable market for policy advice with private advisers, consultants, academia and think tanks” (Eccles, 2015). Some of this shift may be reflected in a rise in DHHS consultancies expenditure over the last decade (see Figure 2 below):

In an effort to maintain the core capacities of the VPS, the State Public Service Commissioner and the Department of Premier and Cabinet issued guidelines for contracting consultants (Department of Premier and Cabinet Victoria, 2019; Victorian Public Sector Commission, 2015). These directed that “professional services [firms] should not be engaged to undertake work identified as universal and enduring” public service functions (Department of Premier and Cabinet Victoria, 2019, p. 5). Nevertheless, as expressed in interviews by both consultants and public servants, work practiced by consultants widely pertains to these areas. One senior public servant said that “we often end up using consultancies for core policy work, even though that’s the space where you think, well, surely the bureaucracy has got superior experience and skills” (Interview, 2021b).

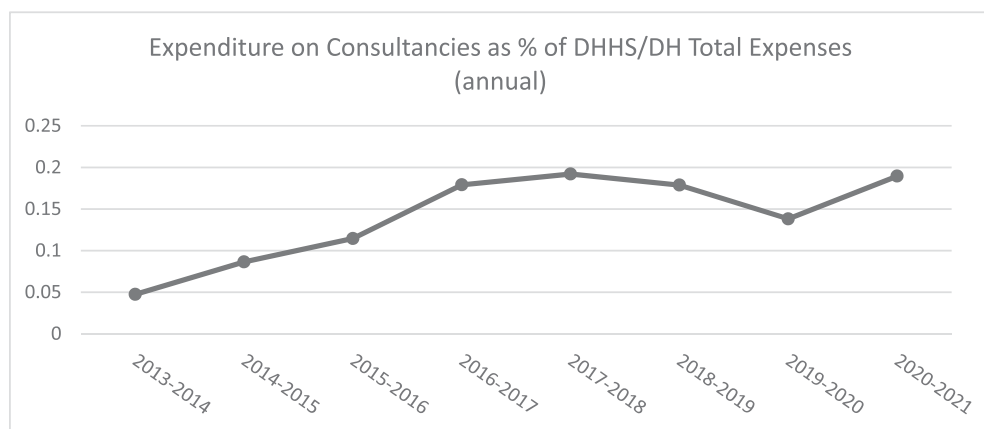


FIGURE 2 Annual Expenditures on consultancies as % of Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)/DH Total Expenses (*source*: multiple DHHS/DH annual reports, 2014–2022)

More specifically, consultants in Victoria have a role in translating “big” policy ideas to specific choices of policy instruments, and their adaptation to local context. One senior public servant said that “Consultants often translate the big ideas into the next level of detail. They might be the ones who say ‘you want to move to a different model of hospital funding. Let’s work through exactly how it works’” (Interview, 2021b). At the same time, both civil servants and consultants stressed that the policy direction is decided by elected and senior officials, and in most cases, policy advice is presented to senior decision makers by civil servants themselves (even if informed by consultants’ work).

4.1.4 | Institutionalization and lock-in

Consultants’ involvement in core work is institutionalized: held in place by formal and informal rules and procedures. Formally, DHHS issues contractual frameworks, “Strategic Alliances”, with a small number of firms, exempting them from regular tendering. This procedure was intended to:

Leverage strategic consultancy relationships to support capability uplift of our people and transformational change of the department and our services, as well as to improve the quality of the strategic advice

(DHHS, 2019, p. 147).

These arrangements allow for repeated major engagements with the same firms (usually one of the “Big Four³”), on policy advice and strategic work. They create long-term partnerships, often limiting competition on consultancies (DHHS, 2018, 2019; author’s interviews). These arrangements are also complemented by informal, yet routine, points of consultants’ engagement. Multiple respondents identified the commencement of public inquiry commissions, a common policy formulation tool in Australia and Victoria (Craft & Halligan, 2020; Phillimore & Arklay, 2015); and the requirement for a “business case” in budget cycles, as moments when government seeks consultants’ support, and when consultants promote their inclusion (author’s interviews). One consultant described these processes: “we will be listening to the public submissions, anticipating

what government might need to do. And then, all the consulting firms would be thinking about... how to go about implementing it to the next step” (Interview, 2021c).

This routine and repeated use of consultancies also contributes to dense networks between consultants and public servants. Multiple interviewees described a “revolving door” between the consulting industry and the public service (Interview, 2021a, 2021b, 2021d, 2021n, see also Keele, 2017), which creates strong professional and personal ties and knowledge flow. Consultants drew heavily on their familiarity with the VPS in securing contracts, further locking-in their roles. One senior public servant, who worked as a consultant previously, said:

In Victoria, in particular, there's lots of people like me who'd moved in and out of the department [to consulting firms]... [and] we had millions of dollars of work, which was a series of forty-fifty-thousand-dollar jobs, we just kept this rolling cycle. A bit of strategic advisory. And then we'll design an evaluation framework and then we'll do this and then will do that... it was because the relationship going down to the bottom, you've got people at junior levels commissioning small pieces of work, because of those deep relationships

(Interview, 2021b).

In line with this observation, interviews revealed a myriad of informal practices, including working to shape tenders' content to align with firms' expertise; pitching pro-bono work to secure paid work; working to enter early to the policy conversation, to expand their hiring potential; and placing senior consultants in public purchasing roles. One senior consultant (and former public servant) described the effort to keep strong ties with public servants:

We are trying to anticipate, well, what's the next thing? How can we help? [...] Sometimes [it's] just to say [to a public servant], look, if you've got a tricky issue or you need a slide pack, pulling together some thinking, or if you might have to go and see the minister, just come and ask us, I'm not going to bill you. Call in a favor if you need to

(Interview, 2021d).

These informal ties and relationships are an outcome of continuous use of the same firms over time and are important in producing further consultancies contracts.

4.1.5 | Policy capacity

Consultants' inclusion in policy formulation was often recognized as essential due to limited in-house abilities. In line with public reports, bureaucrats and consultants commented on the VPS having been “contracted down” or brought to “bare-bones” to the point it is limited in producing detailed policy options. One senior public servant said: “public servants do the scut work, and the consultants are brought in to do the interesting, inventive, creative work. Because that's where the talent is. So, it's a vicious cycle” (Interview, 2021a). This “vicious cycle” also manifested in how bureaucrats reflected on the department's policy capacity. While bureaucrats stated repeatedly that the responsibility for policy advice remains with civil servants, they acknowledged that substantive work of developing options regularly includes consultants, because of limited in-house capacity. One senior public servant said:

In Australia and Victoria particularly, I think the public service has been contracted down to more administrative policy ownership, but not necessarily policy options...

governments of both flavors like to have some level of independent view of ‘we’ve got some choices here, who are the experts?’ And that’s partly political, but it’s [also due to] lack of trust in the capability of the public service

(Interview, 2021e).

On the other hand, consulting firms have developed policy-relevant knowledge and skills, reflected in policy-specific units within consulting firms in Victoria and Australia generally.⁴ Firms’ capacity was often acknowledged in interviews alongside, or in contrast, to limited internal capacity.

Alongside capacity, interviewees repeatedly expressed the complexity and fragmentation of the health policy sector in Victoria when discussing consultants’ use. Especially, participants described the challenges of reaching a consensual policy proposal that aligns with the preferences of actors from multiple sectors and orders of government. Consultancies provide coordination capacities, to manage complex consultations and negotiations in linkage work; but they were also needed to provide legitimacy and perceived unbiasedness, in the many cases where multiple stakeholders’ interests conflicted on a single policy issue. A senior experienced consultant said that:

They [the government] are often engaging you to go outward and to engage with the stakeholders. That’s where they’re looking for the independence, people who’ve got the right expertise, to be able to influence, impact, shape, and do that in a collaborative way and give them a result

(Interview, 2021f).

On using consultants for this end, one senior public servant and former consultant said that “government often knows what it wants to do, but it’s very hard given a fractured sector that disagrees about where the money should go... [having] an independent piece come back to government [we can say] we’re not arguing with it, we’re just implementing it” (Interview, 2021g). This external legitimacy is needed as often the government, while holding primary authority is perceived as one actor with specific interests, in conflict with other policy subsystem members. Having an external actor, unaffiliated with the state, progress formulation, works to diffuse some of that tension. This use of consultants for external legitimacy has been suggested in the past in studies on consultants in public policy (Leys, 1999; Momani & Khirfan, 2013); and was mentioned in case Ontario as well (see below) as a reason to access external consultants support. The emphasis in Victoria was on legitimacy facing stakeholders within the policy sector/health system (rather than public-facing legitimacy), evoking the complexity mentioned earlier.

To summarize the Victoria case, consultants are involved in core policy work and are institutionalized through formal rules and routine practices. While ultimately, the responsibility for the integration of their input in policy advice to decision-makers remains within the VPS, the policy work to develop such advice is supplied extensively by consultants. This role is driven by the limited in-house capacity and the policy sector complexity in Victoria.

4.2 | Case ontario: Consultants supporting formulation from the outside

4.2.1 | Ontario, Canada: Consultants’ use background

Governments in Canada, on the federal and provincial levels, use consultants extensively (Howlett & Migone, 2013a; Speers, 2018). However, consultants’ involvement in substance policy work

appears sparse (Howlett & Migone, 2013b). In periods of hiring freeze and austerity during the 1990s and early 2000s, there has been massive reliance on external consultants to supplement government in-house capacity, which was impacted by reductions in internal hiring (in Canada generally and in Ontario specifically) (Evans & Fanelli, 2018; Perl & White, 2002). This occurred mostly as regards to “operational and administrative support staff”, as opposed to more high-level management personnel, and these capacities generally remained intact (Perl & White, 2002, p. 68).

4.2.2 | Ontario: The policy context

The specific policy context in Ontario is important in analyzing consultants' policy roles. The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) is the prominent actor in health policy formulation in the province. The federal and provincial make-up of responsibilities in health, leaves the province with extensive authority, in contrast to Victoria (Doberstein, 2020; Flood et al., 2017; Marchildon, 2013; author's interviews). Moreover, over the last couple of decades, the Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) functioned as mid-level organizing and facilitating bodies with a service-delivery mandate, tasked with coordinating the local health system throughout the province (Doberstein, 2020; Local Health System Integration Act, 2006).⁵ Delegating this work to the LHINs left the ministry to focus on formulation: “steering” instead of “rowing” (Doberstein, 2020). Compared to the case of Victoria, the ministry in Ontario, while still managing a complex system, holds more authority and is less restrained in formulation.

4.2.3 | Ontario: Consultants' role in policy formulation

In Ontario, consultants support formulation from the outside, and engage primarily in linkage work. Core policy formulation work (the development and forwarding of policy alternatives) is rarely delegated to consultants, and primarily performed by public servants. Senior bureaucrats in Ontario described, in their own words, what they view as “actual”, “proper”, “strategic” or “real” policy work, and emphasized that such work, which consists of analyzing policy and developing policy alternatives, is usually not within the realm of consultants' activity. In responses to questions on type of tasks consultants perform, development of policy alternatives and policy advice was mentioned each by 1 bureaucrat out 15 interviewed (7%), and policy analysis was mentioned by 3 (20%). Consultants themselves also mentioned these tasks sparsely (5% and 32%, respectively). One senior public servant said that the ministry might hire consultants to perform tasks involving specific expertise lacking in the ministry; but “when it comes to proper policy, it's more about using those forums [referring to health service providers] than about using a consulting firm” (Interview, 2021i). One consultant and former public servant said: “a lot of the use for consulting firms is on smaller, tactical questions, not quite operational policy, but definitely not strategic policy” (Interview, 2020a). Another former senior public servant noted: “consultants [use] is not necessarily to inform the actual policy, but more to be the legs and feet on the ground to do the work that we don't have the capacity to do” (Interview, 2020b). This distinction between “actual” policy work, and supportive work to replace capacity lacunes, voiced throughout Ontario interviews, echoes theoretical distinctions offered earlier, between “core” and “linkage” work. It is especially striking, considering that consultants' involvement in case Victoria is described as pertaining to all formulation aspects.

This overall marginal role in core formulation work is also reflected in public data on MOHLTC’s consultancies use. Utilizing Ontario’s categorization, Figure 3 below demonstrates that only a small fraction of contracts is dedicated to what the province defines as “Policy, Research, and Development”,⁶ while most delegated work is related to “IT” (Information Technology) and “Management”. To gain more insight into the last category (which included 66% of contracts) titles under “management” were further analyzed to show contracts including reference to “evaluation” or “review”;⁷ “project management”; and other more general “management”⁸ tasks.

Ontario Auditor General’s report (2019) on consultancies provided additional insights:

There is still an over-reliance on IT consultants... ministries at times used consultants for ongoing or operational work that could have been undertaken more cost-effectively by full-time permanent or term employees

(Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2018, p. 619).

While important, the services mentioned above do not pertain to policy alternatives development, as in case Victoria, and as the concept of core formulation work suggests. How, then, are consultants used in formulation in Ontario? Based on interviews, consultants primarily provide expertise in specific areas where it is lacking in-house, and assist in extending governments’ reach to the broader subsystem through consultations, research, and jurisdictions scans (author’s interviews). Some examples of consultants’ assignments, according to a former senior public servant were: “what should the structure of a regulatory college look like? What are the best practices around measuring... access to care, often with an I.T. or an information management site?” (Interview, 2020a). One experienced public servant, for example, said that consultants were used “especially [regarding] hospitals because they [hospitals] are so highly professionalized” (Interview, 2020b). Such expertise would often support the government in reviewing how hospitals are functioning, and interpreting problems associated with their work. One senior consultant with

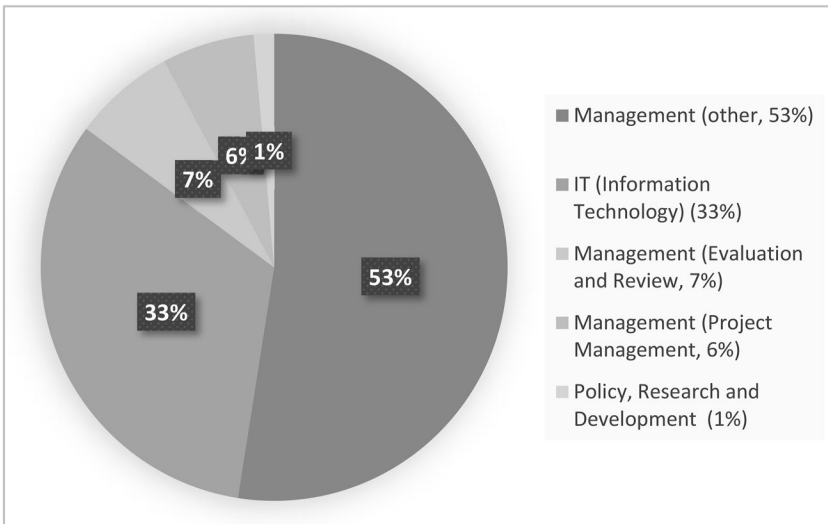


FIGURE 3 Figure 1: The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) and health-related consultants’ contracts, 2016–2018, as categorized by Ontario Government (source: Author’s compilation based on Ontario Government data). N = 141

experience in the public service said: “the government may come (to consultants) and say, would you be agreeable to leading a team to review organization X and this problem they have, or we think they have, because we can't get a straight answer. We need an independent third-party view” (Interview, 2021j). In these roles, consultants use expertise, often associated with their experience in auditing and management, to construct a picture of the policy field with which the government interacts.

Finally, public servants and consultants mentioned the use of consultants for tasks of organizing province-wide or local consultations, with experts, service providers, and citizens and engaging stakeholders. One consultant described such a case:

They [the Ministry] had a bunch of money they wanted to spend on supporting mental health issues. We led an external stakeholder panel of top-notch experts from around Canada through a process of different options: how should the government allocate this money to childcare agencies, children, youth, mental agencies? Should they be spending more money with indigenous kids in the north or for teen anxiety in urban areas?

(Interview, 2020b).

While consultants are not directly developing policy alternatives in these roles, they are nevertheless placed to structure such debates (as recent studies have shown, see: Gabriel & Paulus, 2015; Vogelpohl, 2018). Additionally, public servants stressed that consultants' use for such tasks stems from their perception as overall independent and detached from politics and policy preferences. One public servant said:

We had an omnibus bill [with] one piece that would open and we needed to talk with some specific providers around their work, and the implication of that legislation changing... so consultants often will come in the middle and have some of those conversations and come back with a more objective perspective... you're having somebody in the middle who's saying what are the real impacts

(Interview, 2020b).

In linkage roles, then, consultants in Ontario are working outside of the core work of formulation, mediating knowledge and insight about and interpreting the policy environment.

4.2.4 | Institutionalization

In contrasting the two cases, consultants' involvement in policy formulation work in Ontario is not routine, but rather irregular. Formal rules and informal routines that facilitated consultants and were salient in Victoria were missing from the Ontario case. While in Victoria consultancies' use is entrenched through Strategic Alliances, in Ontario the hiring processes were described by both consultants and bureaucrats as lengthy and cumbersome.⁹ As one bureaucrat noted, “The process for hiring is also very long. The last time we hired [consultants], it took us almost a year to get them on board” (Interview, 2021h). Moreover, respondents described the rare cases where consultants were involved in core policy work, as exceptional, with one senior public servant saying: “If you would have asked me to think of another instance [referring to a case where consultants provided policy advice] I could not. It was that rare” (Interview, 2021k).

4.2.5 | Capacity

In marked contrast to Victoria, where limited in-house capacity was widely evoked as related to consultancy use, in Ontario, public servants and consultants acknowledged public service policy abilities and skills. Specifically, respondents described policy issues ownership and capacity; in-house expertise; and ability to perform policy research and analysis on most relevant policy aspects. One consultant and former bureaucrat said “they (the ministry) have branches dedicated to policy research and evaluation... and they will do deep dives on subject matter. So, when research is needed from another area in the ministry, they’ll ask them and that can inform strategy. Rather than hiring consultants, they have that internal capacity” (Interview, 2021i). Along with an acknowledgment of ministry’s internal policy capacity, bureaucrats also mentioned the limited experience of consultants with policy issues on the provincial level, and the need to extensively train and educate them on substantive policy issues, when hired (Interview, 2020e, 2021h, 2021m).

To summarize the Ontario case, while used extensively, as available public data demonstrates, consultants are rarely included in core formulation work, and their role largely pertains to linkage work (in IT, especially, the volume of their use is extensive). Rather than taking an active part in developing policy alternatives, consultants function as a linkage between the government to pools of knowledge or stakeholders. They supply expertise and mediate positions and policy preferences to the government, providing an understanding of the policy field on which policy is developed.

5 | DISCUSSION

The cases above demonstrate that governments’ utilization of consultants in policy formulation varies, even within LMEs and the Anglo-Westminster administrative tradition. In Victoria, consultants are integrated throughout formulation and take part in both core and linkage formulation work. Importantly, they perform policy analysis, specify “big” policy ideas into concrete policy proposals and provide policy advice. This work, associated normatively and theoretically with core public service roles, is rarely indicated to be taken by consultants in Ontario. In marked contrast, in Ontario policy formulation proceeds in public-service led style, and public servants view their own position in core work as pivotal. Consultants are used to bridge well-defined expertise and capacities lacunes and are placed in linkage roles: delivering policy-relevant insights, either from areas of expertise or as relates to policy actors and stakeholders. These insights are then used in policy development.

Further, the analysis in the cases shows marked variation in terms of the institutionalization of consultants in formulation work. In Victoria, there exist formal and informal rules that forward and reinforce consultants’ hiring, and their inclusion in formulation work is regular, as indicated both by interviews and by the volume of formulation-relevant consultancies contracts. In Ontario, despite the extensive use of consultants by the ministry, large share of it is dedicated rather to IT¹⁰ and management-related work. The use of consultants for formulation is more scattered, as indicated by interviews and contract analysis, with the procurement process de-facto complicating their hiring.

As the in-case analysis demonstrates, these different roles place consultants in different positions in terms of potential policy impact. In core formulation roles, consultants’ impact extends to policy alternatives themselves. In specifying “big” policy ideas into concrete policy plans, consultants are placed to shape the choice of a policy instrument, how it is calibrated and applied, and thus have impact on “who gets what, when and how” (Laswell, 1936). As previous studies have shown, consulting firms and private market consultants are broadly associated with neo-liberal ideas and practices, which may suggest the direction of this impact (Lapsley &

Oldfield, 2001; O'Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016). Their inclusion in these roles also suggests issues of democratic deficit, where private and unelected actors shape what the government chooses to do (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2014). Continued, routine use of consultants in such roles also carries potential impact on public service capacity, status, and perceived authority in policy advice (see also: Speers, 2018; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019). The qualitative insights from case Victoria demonstrate how extensive use of consultants in core roles makes their use normal and expected; and their perception as policy skillful and insightful can gain credence, sometimes over that of the public service. Their continuing use for policy also expands their actual knowledge and skills, making their use more attractive.

In linkage roles, consultants have more limited direct impact on shaping the chosen policy alternative, as case Ontario demonstrates. Nevertheless, they function as mediators of knowledge from expertise fields and of preferences and interests of other policy actors. As such, they assist in structuring the policy picture for the government and interpreting its policy environment. They can import specific policy rationalities, approaches, and ideas, through which this interpretation takes place (see, on these points: Hurl, 2021; Seabrooke, 2014). And in organizing consultations, consultants can amplify some voices over others, structure the content of the policy debate and impact the overall message, that is later presented to governments (Gabriel & Paulus, 2015; Vogelpohl, 2018; Weitkamp & Longhurst, 2012). That independence and objectivity are cited by public servants as a reason to use consultants for these ends, as this research shows, further reaffirms some of the concerns around consultants' use in these roles. The message delivered by consultants about the policy environment can be perceived as objective, despite the embeddedness of consulting firms in specific policy rationalities, often associated with neo-liberal paradigms and market-oriented approaches and preferences (Christensen & Skærbæk, 2010; Hurl, 2018).

Table 2 below summarizes the two different approaches to using consultants in each jurisdiction, with the potential associated policy impact:

In-house policy capacity is central to explaining the differing involvement of consultants' policy formulation. Governments use consultants' expertise for core policy work because they are limited in performing the analysis and coordination tasks themselves. These structural elements of the environment in which formulation takes place: the capacity of the state; the complexity of the policy sector and the delegation (or not) of authority to external service providers differ between the cases. Repeatedly, bureaucrats in Victoria pointed out the progressive "bare-bones" status of the public service and the lack of breadth of in-house policy skills, as a prominent driver of seeking

TABLE 2 Comparing patterns of consultants' use in formulation

	Victoria, Australia: Partners in formulation	Ontario, Canada: Public service led
Membership in the policy network ("those who actually make policy")	Consultants are routinely invited into the policy network.	Consultants are rarely invited into the policy network.
Type of formulation-related work	Core and linkage policy formulation work	Primarily linkage policy formulation work
Institutionalization of consultants in formulation work	High (roles repeated and grounded by formal and informal rules).	Low (use is concrete-need based and infrequent).
Potential policy impact of consultants	The substance and choice of policy alternatives; interpretation and understanding of the policy environment.	Government's interpretation and understanding of the policy environment.

consultants. In Ontario, not only was this narrative missing from the description of consultants' use, but bureaucrats repeatedly took pride in their in-house capacities and marked consultancies as a last resort for policy advice and skills. A second important factor is policy sector complexity. The breadth of management, coordination, and analysis work required in a devolved, highly complex system such as in Victoria, creates a need for external support, that consulting firms offer regularly. While used in some cases for similar purposes in Ontario, the concentration of decision-making authority within the provincial government allows the Ministry to be a much more hands-on, lead-from-the-center actor in the process of formulation. Consultants assist, but much more sparsely.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

While many governments utilize consultants in policy formulation, they do so differently. This paper offers new and nuanced ways of thinking about variation in consultants' policy formulation roles and offers comparative empirics to expose what drives this variation. It distinguishes between consultants' core and linkage policy roles. In core policy roles, consultants offer policy advice, specify policy ideas toward concrete policy options, and regularly perform policy analysis. Their impact extends to content and choice of policy proposals: what the government decides to do about a policy problem. In linkage roles, consultants connect the government to other actors and pools of knowledge in the policy subsystem, mediating expert knowledge and insights about other policy actors' preferences and interests. While not directly shaping policy alternatives, in these roles they have important impact in structuring how the government interprets and understands its policy environment, in ways that later can form the basis for policy development.

The analysis in the paper exposes the drivers for the excessive inclusion (in some cases) of consultants in core policy formulation work. It demonstrates how drawbacks in in-house analytical policy capacity create demand for external policy consulting work, and how lock-in mechanisms operate to maintain these roles over time. Policy formulation in Victoria, which also serves here as an illustrative example for broader processes in Australia, is a joint product of the private and the public sector, with complex relations of interdependency, knowledge flow, and dense relations between the industries, holding this co-production in place. In contrast, in Canada, where internal public service capacity and "lead-from-the-center" approach survived waves of reforms, the core work of policy formulation remains mainly in the hands of the state, with reliance on consultants primarily in linkage work. It also shows that high complexity in a policy sector produces a need for external legitimacy and coordination capacities, supplied by consultants. These factors represent some of the long-term legacies of public sector reforms and restructuring. This research has important implications for the study of consultants' policy formulation roles, and debates on the role of the state in policymaking. It suggests that in cases where public sector restructuring has been extreme, the ability of the state to formulate policies on its own was also impacted, producing excessive reliance on consultants.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The underlying data supporting this work has been made permanently and publicly available via Figshare: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.21525861.v1>.

CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants signed an “informed consent to participate form” approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the University of Toronto.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See data availability statement for full lists of consultancies' contracts.
- ² Following COVID-19, the DHHS was split, with Department of Health as a stand-alone department; and the portfolio of Department of Human Services amalgamated with Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DH annual report 2021).
- ³ The “Big Four” refers to the four largest international accounting firms: Deloitte, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), Ernst & Young (EY), and Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG).
- ⁴ Many international and local consulting firms in Australia have dedicated health-policy units, such as Healthcare & Health Sector in EY; National Health, Aging and Human Services in KPMG; Healthcare team in PWC Australia, Health Economics and Social Policy in Deloitte (firms' websites).
- ⁵ At the time of the research, Ontario began transforming the LHINs structure into “health teams”, consisting of groups of local providers and organizations.
- ⁶ This category, along with “project management”, largely corresponds to “policy/program advice and delivery” in Victoria.
- ⁷ This category largely corresponds to “program assessment and evaluation” in Victoria.
- ⁸ These included projects titles that indicate little direct implication to formulation, often focused on management within the ministry, implementation, or technical work with service providers and funded agencies. Examples include HRIS (Human Resource Information System) or MIS (Management Information System) support, matters of hospital financial and infrastructures management.
- ⁹ To an extent, a legacy of the 2008–2009 Ontario e-health scandal, when the agency paid IT consultants millions without proper oversight (Interview, 2020d; Interview, 2021h; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2009).
- ¹⁰ Indeed, the large volume of IT-related work, which was not the focus of this research, may well indicate regular reliance on consultants in Ontario in IT instead, especially when taken together with the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario report (2018). This also corresponds to an expanding body of research on IT consultants in public sector work and dependencies their work produces (Weiss, 2018; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019).

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- Interview. (2021i). *Senior public servant, Ontario, Canada*. Interviewed by author through Zoom.
- Interview. (2021j). *Consultant/former senior public servant, Ontario, Canada*. Interviewed by author through Zoom.
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