

Reforming Policy Puritanism

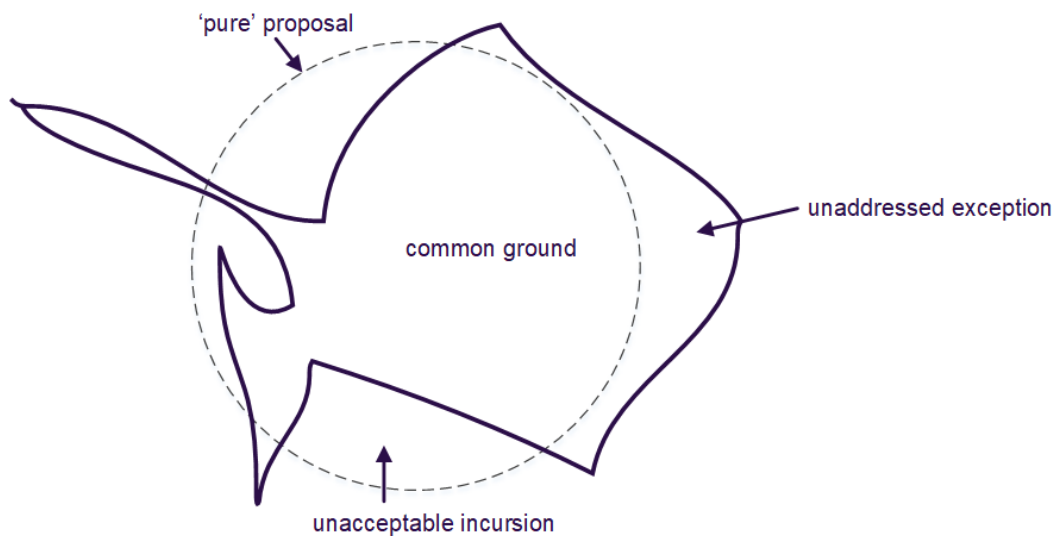
People in publicly funded organisations often have deeply held views about how to maximise public value. These views come from many sources, such as deep content knowledge, practical experience, or research and analysis. When people have different deeply held views, those views can easily become entrenched positions. From there, constructive compromise can start to look like failure, and policy ideas can start to look like puritanical ideals.

Many people working in publicly funded organisations share a principled desire to achieve 'the best' public policy, services, and outcomes. These people often have quite different ideas about how to achieve those common goals.

Differences of opinion are reinforced and amplified by decision-making frameworks based on advocacy. A team, or organisation, or department, or Minister advocating for their perspective is automatically in competition with other advocates for other perspectives. Resources are finite, and the competition for ideas very quickly crystallises into a competition for resources. Differences are also reinforced by specialisation in topics, like mental health, or functions, like compliance or finance.

Inflexible, puritanical positions in debates about public policy often fail to recognise that different people can assign value in different ways, even based on the same facts. Competitive, advocacy-based decision making tends also to emphasise contested points rather than common ground.

People who have dug deeply into entrenched positions can find it hard to accept big incursions into those positions, particularly in one step. Holding out for surrender can take a long time, or might never happen. In the meantime, opportunities are missed for less aggressive improvements on common ground. Even if you do 'win' the argument, reality may never catch up with that victory if the people involved in implementation fail, or refuse, to do it well.



Even when people have strong and apparently incompatible opinions, there are ways of framing debates and decisions that are more flexible and less puritanical. Emphasising genuinely common values or goals can help to shift focus from who 'wins' a big argument towards shared credit for modest, but tangible, gains. It also helps to focus discussion on practical outcomes in the real world rather than perfect, but somewhat abstract solutions on paper.

Many publicly funded organisations are functionally immortal and can afford to play a long game. Public value builds incrementally from a combination of quick wins and generational shifts. Better is good. Be willing to sign up for small steps forward on a long, hard road.

Building on the things we have in common, and wholeheartedly embracing steps in the right direction, is not as dramatic as a glorious victory of us over them. But it does help to build, or at least do no more damage, to the connections that bind us together in pursuit of public value. It also offers a path to incremental improvements, starting today, in place of an uncertain strategy of trying to win big someday.

The perfection of our vision and the persuasiveness of our arguments can be an unhelpful distraction from the hard and important work of figuring out how to make things better in the mess of the real world. Reforming our approach to making decisions about public value can help us to avoid our idea of the perfect from becoming the enemy of the public good.