

# Policy Making 101

If newly recruited civil servants and Spads are lucky, they learn these lessons whilst working alongside more experienced colleagues. If not, they learn the hard way.

## Giles Wilkes' Government Policy Rules

### The Temptation of Smart Ideas

There are layers of people, laws, money and custom to wade through before anything starts to change. When you take power, you think the point is to have smart ideas. When you leave, all your praise is for the rare officials who just know how to get things done.

### Magic Spad Theory

When officials reach a total impasse in some fundamental question - say, "The Home Office is being mean to business people" - and someone thinks that getting 'Our Spad' to talk to 'their Spad' will fix it. No, it won't. The problem is inherent.

*On the other hand:*

If you find yourself the only Spad on an issue, this is probably because the issue sucks.

### Organisation Chart Arrows Point the Wrong Way

Centralisers believe that 'the Centre' is the source of both invention and effective decision-making. Nonsense! The best ideas usually bubble up from lower down the hierarchy. The 'higher-ups' job is to bargain the inevitable political trade-offs that emerge. Hence ...

### The Pyramid of Indifference

Problems are solved only when they are raised to the level where they give less of a f\*ck. It is the giving of f\*cks that stops things happening.

### The Fundamental Trilemma of Policy

Policies can be some combination of Brilliant, Obvious and Easy to Do, but they can never be all three. If they were, they would have happened already. If you think you have all three, you are missing something.

### Thomas à Becket Syndrome

A Spad mutters some half-thought prejudice, an official overhears, and the next thing you know the severed head of the archbishop lies steaming on his desk. Metaphorically, this reflects how desperate for a steer the official machine can be.

## **The Axis of Anecdotes**

Someone went somewhere recently where everything was awful (or looked great) and let's draw all big lessons for mega reform from what they saw one afternoon in Stoke when they met someone.

## **The Paradox of Nuance**

The more the official says "it's complicated", the more the impatient politico is tempted just to try something really extreme in order to escape all this complexity.

## **Policy by Mouth-Feel**

Policies will in the end be judged by the Comms Spad, and 95% of the time by how they sound. Alliteration, the use of key buzzwords like Entrepreneur, Growth and Investment, and zeroing in on round number dates like 2030, all follow naturally

## **The One Stop Shop Fallacy**

Learning of the 1000 ways that business support is given, the Spad proposes a One Stop Shop where they can all be found. Obviously a dumb idea: you've just recreated the DTI

The lesson: complexity is inherent. You don't eliminate it by putting it in one place, and you give the telephone receptionist a total nightmare.

Also applies to flat tax nutters, Universal Basic Income evangelists, etc

## **The Regional Fallacy**

If you believe in regional interest rates, or even regional stockmarkets, you need to be escorted from the building.

## **Things No-one Is Ever Against**

- Investment
- Innovation
- R&D
- Entrepreneurship
- 'Hubs', 'Catalysts' and 'Accelerators' \*
- Transparency
- Exports
- How Germany Does Things

PS No-one is ever sure what they are.

And Giles subsequently added these two self-explanatory rules:

**Asking people is a terrible idea.**

**Attempts to make policy both Good and Popular will invariably fail at both.**

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### **Wilfred Hyde's Three Laws of Public Administration**

The importance of a decision is in inverse proportion to the time that is available to make it.

Once things start going wrong, they go on going wrong.

All crises, when thoroughly examined, can be traced back to crises of typing, photocopying or facsimile machines.

#### **Notes**

Giles Wilkes was [a Special Adviser \(Spad\)](#) in the Department of Business from 2010 to 2014, worked at the FT from 2014 to 2016, and was then a Spad in No.10 Downing Street until 2019.

Wilfred Hyde was a Home Office Deputy Secretary (Director General) in the 1980s. "Quite austere but with a dry twinkle" (Jonathan Potts)