

# **It's always Politics in the End... Reflections on the Future of Urban Health**

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City Health Conference 2015, Barcelona, Spain, 6 November**

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Let me begin with a quote from Albert Einstein. Once he was asked: "Why is it that when the mind of man has stretched so far as to discover the structure of the atom we have been unable to devise the political means to keep the atom from destroying us?" He replied in the following way: "That is simple ... It is because politics is more difficult than physics".

About physics I know too little but I can concur with the master scientist that politics is complex, occasionally chaotic and certainly difficult. It was my preoccupation for our twenty years – three years a local Councillor and twenty as a Legislator in the Western Australian State Parliament. For ten years I was a party leader (the Australian Labor Party), three as a Minister and five as the Premier of the State. I learnt much about power and influence and how they are won and lost, having fought three elections as leader, losing the first but winning the next two.

For the purpose of my talk today I'm going to adopt an approach I used when asked by Australia's Buddhist Monks and Nuns to give an account of the political position of Buddhism in Australian society. They wanted me to put on my politics hat and inform them about their strengths and weaknesses as a contributor to our society – and as objectively as possible.

## **THE CITY HEALTH MOVEMENT**

So my question for today is: What is the political position of the City Health Movement? Note that I have called it a "movement" – and this is the first point I wish to make. Obviously it's not a political party but it does have a shared agenda in relation to the prevention of ill-health and the promotion of well-being in urban settings (see the WHO definition of health developed in 1946). Attached to this agenda are plenty of ideas and lots of evidence about what works and doesn't work.

When it comes to ideas, three stand out as giving real structure to what I've called a movement. Firstly, it adopts a holistic approach that sees a city as an inter-connected whole in which social, economic, environmental and political forces are all involved. By its very nature it is inter-disciplinary. Secondly, it believes in engaging the community – and in some cases individuals themselves – in developing, delivering and evaluating initiatives. Thirdly, it's inclusive, believing that all residents and not just the majority need to have their rights and interests protected and promoted. In its considerations equity in both access and outcomes is central.

### **POLITICAL SUPPORT**

What then is the political position of this Movement for Healthy Cities? So to my second point – the movement has supporters within the political class and, we should also add, amongst their bureaucratic advisers. These supporters can be seen in the mainstream parties from left-of-centre to right-of-centre and in some of the new political movements that have contested elections – and won seats in Parliaments in recent years. We shouldn't under-estimate the role of these political supporters but nor should we over-estimate the strength of their position. Indeed, whether we take a national or a global perspective, we can't conclude that the ideas associated with healthy cities are winning the war. We know urbanisation is becoming more important as the context for living but also that it's not necessarily linked to sustainability, democratic engagement or relief from poverty. There are other agendas – and in many instances they work against city health.

Why is this so? What can be done about it? Obviously many factors are involved but one amongst them is the lack of a proper connection between the political class (let's call them the insiders) and the movement outside politics (let's call them the outsiders). The outsiders are full of ideas but are primarily focussed on the research side of the theory/practice partnership. This isn't easy, there being a good deal of contention within the social sciences as to what does and doesn't count as knowledge. So it is that we see different tribes attached to different paradigms battling it out in academia and its journals; healthy cities being but one of many. But what's even harder is to find and develop connections with the political class whose decisions are so important in influencing outcomes.

From my time in politics, I can recognise the existence of four types of political attitude. Sometimes a particular politician will clearly represent one such attitude but more

commonly such attitudes co-exist within the mind of the individual politician battling it out for attention and relevance.

### **FIXERS, MADMEN, STRAIGHTMEN AND POPULISTS**

The late Tony Benn identified three types of politician and I will add a fourth. Benn's list included "Fixers", "Madmen" and "Straightmen". The Fixers see a world of interests and seek accommodation across the system by "whatever it takes". The Madmen exist in a world of big ideas and seek transformation rather than evolutionary changes. The Straightmen follow due process and are focused on sustainable and community-wide results from policy. I would add a fourth – "Populists" – who always look to majority opinions to guide their decision-making. When opinions change so do they!

In my judgement the city health movement should regard the Straightmen from whatever party as their political base. They share a mentality and can support each other in the inevitable battles between commonsense and vested interests, prejudice and simplistic ideology. Human nature being what it is such battles are never completely "won" and indeed even the noblest of politicians need the passion of ideology and the capacity to accommodate differences if they are to succeed. Compromise is part of politics and has to be so if progress is to be made – and sustained. But what can happen is that the balance of forces can be tipped in the direction of good policy and healthy outcomes, thus creating a momentum for change that can feed off itself.

### **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**

This leads me to my fifth point – the healthy cities movement needs to develop an ongoing and personal relationship with the Straightmen. That means using their research findings to call to account ideologists who pursue policy independently of the consequences of its application, fixers who allow vested interests to undermine the public interest and populists who care for little except the next opinion poll. However, to really help their supporters on the inside it's important that researchers don't over-sell their findings. Ambiguity is of the essence of things and rarely will it be a case of all good or all bad. More often than not even the best of initiatives will have its downside. I say this because trust is important and that can only be built on the basis of not just consistency but also honesty.

In a sense this is saying to the outsiders to do what they do best – research a topic and demonstrate their findings to be scientifically valid – but adding to that public advocacy of their findings. Such advocacy should be linked to entry into the world of the insiders.

Contact the relevant area within the bureaucracy and arrange meetings and a presentation of your research results. Discuss your findings with MPs and their staff and to help in this endeavour contact the political parties, stakeholders and lobby groups to determine their perspectives. Certainly continue to participate in conferences such as this but back it up with articles for the newspaper, media interviews and all of that online activity possible today. Whatever works, just try to get the message out there where it can be picked up. This will sharpen your intellect and add to your political savvy. When you are offering advice, think through the full implications and take to the insiders not just an idea or a policy but a “strategy” that can demonstrate to the politician that he or she won’t be committing political suicide by taking up the cause. There are “ends” but in many ways the “means” are just as important.

In the real world of politics, the smallest of problems associated with an initiative can become the biggest of issues. Why? Because there will always be those opposing new initiatives – and they will not find it difficult to get the media to help them prosecute the “I told you so” case. City health will find that the implementation of good initiatives – particularly in relation to the vulnerable and marginalised in our society – will need to be next to perfect to survive the political scrutiny placed on them. We might hope that the truth is otherwise but it isn’t!

What I’m saying here is that we should focus on all aspects of a problem and the solutions we suggest – their relevance, their feasibility and their acceptability. You might say we can leave much of this up to the politicians and their bureaucrats and advisers. Remember, however, the day-to-day pressures they are under and how your considered advice can make a real difference.

### **ARTS OF PERSUASION**

My sixth point relates to the arts of persuasion. It’s about the way you present ideas to the insiders. They will have their own narrative about “the state of the world” and if you can relate your findings to that it will help. So too might personal case studies that illustrate at an emotional level why change is necessary. Think too of the time you are given to present and make sure you get to the point across before it is too late and the politician has a plane or train to catch.

To all of this you might say: “Research is hard enough but you want me to master the arts of persuasion and policy implementation as well – it’s just not possible!”. My simple

response to this is that the ideologists, the fixers and the populists aren't the sort of people to make allowances for the shortcomings of their opponents. They play it hard and like to win. If you can't back up your research with a strong account of what it means and how it will be relevant and feasible the final hurdle of political acceptability might just be too difficult. See it as a matter of professional pride.

Remember there are moments in time when your research may become central to the political debate. It might be an event or the election of a government with ideas similar to yours; so much better to be known and respected by the insiders when that happens than to have to start from scratch. Just as politicians need to prepare for the time when power comes their way so should researchers be thinking of a time when there is a real chance their findings will be taken very seriously. After all isn't it the public interest that drives their research?

To summarise my argument I would like you all to incorporate the following questions into your work: How will my findings be assimilated into political agendas? How will my findings need to be implemented? I'm not saying that your most commonly asked question (does my work measure up when dissected by the scientific method?) isn't important- indeed it is essential - but I am saying that you can do better by expanding your horizons as I have suggested. The health of all is too important to be sacrificed at the altar of ideology, interest or prejudice.