

Special Issue Article

Feminising Politics to Close the Evidence-Policy Gap: The Case of Social Policy in Scotland

Paul Cairney  and Kirstein Rummery

University of Stirling, UK

Policy studies suggest that scientists should adopt two strategies to close the ‘evidence-policy gap’. First, engage in political debates to help define policy problems and solutions rather than expect the evidence to speak for itself. Second, learn where the action is, form long-term coalitions, and exploit the ‘rules of the game’ to maximise your influence in complex policy-making systems. Both lessons can prompt major dilemmas, for many actors, about going beyond your expertise and comfort zone when engaging politically and pragmatically. Scientists should learn from feminist social policy actors who routinely (a) combine evidence with engagement to pursue social change, and (b) face tough choices about framing their aims in terms of the dominant political discourse. We use Scottish social policy as a case study, examining how feminist actors exploited the opportunity, afforded by constitutional and political reforms since 1999, to create a collaborative ‘velvet triangle’ between the government, academia, and interest groups. Their experience suggests that limited and slow policy change requires major engagement and compromise.

Key words: public policy, policy theory, evidence-based policy-making, feminism, social policy, Scotland

Introduction

It is common in scientific debates to bemoan an evidence-policy gap without regard to the evidence from policy studies about its cause (Cairney 2016a). We argue that scientists in the most active fields – including health and environmental evidence-policy studies – should learn two key lessons (Cairney and Oliver 2016, 2017; Cairney et al. 2016a). First, instead of expecting the evidence to speak for itself, consider raising attention to, and defining, policy problems to increase demand for your favoured solutions. Actors are influential when they: (a) frame their evidence in simple, moral, and/or emotional, terms to generate policy-maker attention; (b) develop knowledge of the policy process to learn where the action

is, form long-term coalitions, and exploit the ‘rules of the game’ to maximise their influence in complex policy-making systems; and, (c) understand how policy-makers combine evidence with governance principles to produce models of evidence-based policy-making.

Second, these strategies prompt dilemmas about the extent to which scientists should: go beyond their expertise and downplay uncertainty to pursue their normative preferences; form alliances with actors that share only some of their preferences; and, frame their position as consistent with problematic government policies. Such issues are not new, but they continue to vex the scientists who adhere to the idea of separating facts from values (critiqued by Douglas 2009) and are more comfortable as ‘honest brokers’ than ‘issue advocates’ (an argument made by Pielke 2007 and critiqued by Jasanoff 2008; see also Cairney 2016b).

Scientists have much to learn from feminist social policy actors who have already faced and reframed such dilemmas – (a) challenging

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the analytical and political value of an artificial fact/value distinction, and (b) combining evidence and values with engagement to pursue social change – but still (c) facing tough choices between framing their aims in terms of the dominant political discourse versus challenging institutional, policy, and social practices founded on patriarchal power (Bacchi 1999; Newman 2012; Pateman 1988). An ‘informal governance’ approach built on forming alliances, and framing issues pragmatically (attaching a feminist dimension to existing policies and practices), can foster short term and limited success while waiting for a ‘window of opportunity’ for more substantive change. An approach built on publicly *challenging* existing policies, and the discourse underpinning them, can involve fewer moral compromises but less likelihood of success. Such dilemmas are resolved by political choice, not ‘the evidence’.

We draw on new research on evidence and policy and Scottish feminist social policy to show how key actors addressed these dilemmas. Cairney and Rummery led two projects (2013–2015) within the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council funded *Centre on Constitutional Change* (led by Professor Michael Keating), which examined the implications of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence (ES/L003325/1 *The Constitutional Future of Scotland and the United Kingdom*). Cairney’s empirical research is based on a combination of policy theory (Cairney 2016a), documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews with 20 Scottish Government civil servants and 20 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and clerks on four committees (Finance, Local Government, Education, Justice) from 2014 to 2015, and an ESRC-funded workshop in June 2015 to bring together 20 academics, MSPs, civil servants, and practitioners, to compare models of evidence use in public service delivery (Cairney 2016c). Its main theme was that, while the phrase ‘evidence-based policy-making’ is often used to depoliticise issues, scientists face inevitable political choices when they (a) decide what forms of evidence count in policy-making, and (b) pursue governance measures to balance central control and local autonomy.

Rummery produced case studies of child care and long-term care policy to examine the relationships between the third sector, academics, and the Scottish Government. Data here are drawn from interviews carried out in the run-up to the referendum: six elected politicians whose portfolio covered gender equality and one of the case studies, purposively sampling for pro and anti-independence supporters; 16 third sector and academic respondents for self-identified ‘women’s equality’ experts and activists; and four civil servants whose remit covered care and/or gender equality. These interviews were semi-structured, recorded, and the results analysed using inductive thematic theory building. The validity and reliability of the results were tested using focus groups with different stakeholders, facilitated by academic and third sector participants with a non-partisan stance

Combined, the data allow us to examine and interpret how feminist actors exploited the opportunity, afforded by constitutional change and political reform from 1999, to create a ‘velvet triangle’ – or policy network between policy-makers, academia, and interest groups – committed to use evidence to pursue gender equity in areas such as child care and long-term care. The main dilemma involved the extent to which they were willing to pursue gender equality by framing it as consistent with, or challenging the very basis of, the ‘neoliberal’ economic policies which often have a disproportionately adverse effect on women. Political choices on the ‘best evidence’, and best ways to achieve policy aims, combined with the choice to work with or challenge the dominant discourse in which they engaged. Further, even if they made such a compromise, they faced years of limited progress. Such experiences help us identify: (a) the practical limits to collaborations to combine evidence and participation to help feminise the policy process, and (b) the often-limited extent to which we should expect scientific evidence to have an impact on policy.

Closing the Evidence-Policy Gap: Insights and Dilemmas

Studies of the relationship between research evidence and policy vary significantly by

discipline, balancing a focus on how to produce the best research with how to understand receptivity to research by policy-makers. There is often an *imbalance* in fields such as health science, public health, and environmental science, in which it is relatively common to (a) begin by establishing criteria for the production of high quality evidence, *then* (b) consider the barriers to its impact on policy (Cairney et al. 2016a; Oliver et al. 2014a, 2014b). Generally, these studies link an evidence-policy gap to a cultural gap between scientists and policy-makers, relating to the languages they use to communicate findings, the time they have to produce and act on recommendations, and their limited incentives to engage with each other. Some have restrictive views on what makes evidence scientific. For example, health scholars often refer to an ideal type of evidence-based medicine, in which you: gather the best evidence on health interventions, based on a hierarchy of methods in which randomised control trials and their systematic review are at the top; and, pursue its direct impact on practice (Oliver et al. 2014b).

This approach to ‘evidence-based policy-making’ contributes to the sense that politics is pathological; the evidence on policy problems and solutions exists, and should speak for itself, but politicians get in the way (Cairney 2016a: 2). It prompts naïve recommendations, such as to present more scientific evidence to reduce uncertainty, simplify the message when supplying evidence, and encourage policy-makers to become better trained to help them think like scientists (Oliver et al. 2014a: 6).

In that context, we offer three lessons from policy studies which focus on *receptivity* to evidence. First, focus on persuasion to reduce ambiguity (the number of ways in which to understand the same problem) and therefore influence the demand for evidence. Policy-makers face too many problems and solutions based on more information than they can process. They use two shortcuts to restrict their search for information and reduce their choices to a manageable number: ‘irrational’ ways to understand policy problems, using emotions, habits, deeply held beliefs, and familiar reference points; and, ‘rational’ ways to establish the best evidence and sources of evidence

on policy solutions (Cairney and Kwiatkowski 2017; Haidt 2001: 818; Kahneman 2012: 20; Lewis 2013: 9–10). ‘The evidence’ is secondary to the ways in which actors frame it and policy-makers react to it (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 1; Baumgartner and Jones 1993: 11–12; Kingdon 1984: 3–4; Cairney 2012: 183). Consequently, practitioners should, for example, tell compelling stories to appeal to the emotions and beliefs of their audience (True et al. 2007: 161; Jones et al. 2014; Weible et al. 2012). The alternative, to use evidence to *challenge* beliefs, is possible but often more akin to a religious conversion than ‘evidence-based’ process.

Second, policy-making takes place in a complex and unpredictable ‘environment’ or ‘system’, containing many key actors, rather than a simple policy cycle with well-ordered stages, containing a clearly defined ‘centre’ (Cairney 2015a, 2015b, 2016a; although compare Althaus et al. 2007 with Colebatch 2006). There are two practical problems with a top-down, stage-based understanding: actors seeking influence could focus their energies in one venue without recognising the diffusion of policy responsibilities; and/or focus at a single point of problem definition or policy selection, without appreciating that policy is made continuously as it is delivered or as decisions to solve one problem intersect with related policies. Instead, they should try to understand complex, multi-level, policy-making environments containing: many actors making or influencing policy in many levels and types of government; many policy-making venues, each with their own formal and informal rules; networks between policy-makers and influential actors, built partly on information exchange and trust; a dominant way of thinking about policy problems and solutions in certain venues and networks; and, the socioeconomic conditions and events which constrain and facilitate action (Cairney 2015a; Cairney and Heikkila 2014; Ostrom 2007; Weible et al. 2012).

A focus on this bigger picture shifts our attention from the use of evidence by a well-defined group of policy-makers to its use by a wide range of actors in a multi-level process. (Cairney 2012: 17–18). It prompts us to be prepared to engage in a long-term strategy to

be in a position to influence policy, identifying the right time to act, where the action is, and the ‘rules of the game’ or, at least, forming coalitions with like-minded actors who possess such skills (Kingdon 1995: 225; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cairney and Jones 2016; Weible et al. 2012: 15; Smith 2013; Stoker 2010: 55–57).

Third, policy-makers can legitimately reject a hierarchy of evidence, and use an eclectic mix of information to solve a problem quickly, because they have a wider frame of reference than scientific specialists (Cairney 2016a: 127–129). They may combine scientific evidence with other forms of knowledge such as practitioner experience, or frames of reference such as governance principles – including democratic accountability, ‘localism’, and the inclusion of service users in the design of public services – during deliberation (Cairney 2016c; Lomas and Brown 2009: 906; Elliott and Popay 2000: 467; Bédard and Ouimet 2012: 625). Consequently, scholars need to know how policy-makers develop models to combine evidence and governance principles to produce policy solutions.

These insights tell us how policy-making works, but not how we should respond. Put simply, this knowledge may put many scientists off; it may not be worth the investment when your day job is scholarship, or worth the reputational hit when you give up an image of objectivity to pursue values. Forming alliances involves major compromises with actors that only share some of your aims. Further, we have limited knowledge of ‘what works’: should you work within the government’s frame of reference to secure some success, or challenge it with the prospect of none? (Cairney and Oliver, 2017).

The Velvet Triangle: How have Feminist Actors Addressed these Dilemmas?

Policy studies suggest that such processes generally take place out of the public spotlight: there are many venues and actors, but power may be concentrated in some, and only some participants have the resources to invest in engagement. There is a large number of terms

to describe such venues and relationships that develop within them – including ‘policy communities’ and ‘informal governance’ – but most accounts stress a tendency towards informal networks of policy-makers and influencers, often built on regular contact which helps produce trust and the development of shared aims, especially when influencers provide reliable information and realistic demands (Cairney 2012: 179).

Woodward (2004: 76) describes, in the European Union, an unusual form of such ‘informal governance’ in which some feminist actors became ‘uncommonly successful’:

The role of EU institutions in orchestrating the policy dance around gender has led to the construction of what is here called a ‘velvet triangle’ of feminist bureaucrats, trusted academics and organized voices in the women’s movement . . . the Commission officials (the so-called femocrats) and europarliamentarians with feminist agendas, gender experts in academia or consultancies, and the established organized women’s movement. Ties of common personal histories frequently connect these fuzzy clusters of participants (2004: 78; 85).

Woodward uses the term ‘velvet triangle’ as a partial contrast to the ‘iron triangles’ – strong and exclusive relationships between congressional committees, federal agencies, and interest groups – identified in early post-war US politics (see Jordan 1981 for a review of terms): “Here, the ‘velvet’ refers to the fact that almost all of the players are female in a predominantly male environment . . . [and] the softness suggested by the fabric indicates considerable vagueness about inputs and loyalties” (Woodward 2004: 84).

Still, the velvet triangle metaphor retains the idea of policy-making via networks, reinforcing the sense that: there is an often-blurry boundary between actors with formal policy responsibility and informal influence; and, policy networks are based on trust generated during explicit policy-making meetings, less formal and often-social gatherings, and the movement of staff between government and non-government posts (see Bache and Flinders 2004; Hooghe and Marks 2003; Jordan and

Cairney 2013; Richardson and Jordan 1979; and compare with Holli 2008; Walby 2005).

However, it has two unusual dimensions. First, Woodward (2004: 76) notes that ‘proponents of social movements such as gender’ criticised the EU for its lack of policy-making transparency *and benefited from it* when pursuing ‘insider strategies’. They used the opportunity to develop networks between three main groups: ‘needy bureaucrats, dedicated activists, and eager academics who are active at national and international levels and frequently linked to each other through informal as well as formal processes’. Further, in common with most networks, they are built partly on the exchange of resources: policy-makers provide access to government, and influencers provide information, advice, and ‘the new ideas, which can increase their bureau’s internal prestige and resources’ (2004: 76). Note the word ‘ideas’ rather than ‘evidence’, since the ‘currency’ of policy debate often relates to the ways in which actors respond to established beliefs.

Second, the ‘velvet triangle’ was built partly on a sense of ‘political marginality and low power resources’: ‘women’s interest groups’ resemble those for minority groups, which are often critical of the ‘establishment’ (in which there is a low representation of women in senior posts) and have limited resources (staffing and money). Consequently, informal governance – out of the public spotlight, and limited to a small number of actors – was their best shot at influence. In this case, it contributed to the EU’s “internal adoption of the idea of ‘gender mainstreaming’” (2004: 77), and the sustainability of such mainstreaming relies on the strength and the cohesion of the triangle, with weaker collaborations resulting in fewer protected and enduring policy gains for women (Rees 2005).

At least two sides of this triangle tend to exist in developed democratic states with a relatively high number of women in public life. Feminist scholars in academia marry activism with scholarly activity, although it is less usual to find academics than third sector activists making the transition to formal politics (Haavio-Mannila 1979). There is a stark contrast between states where there is a

high number of women legislators (who tend to have strong feminist social networks in academia and the third sector) and those with lower numbers of women in an elected role (where links to feminist social networks are weaker) (Lombardo 2008). The role of individual ‘femocrats’ – advocates of women’s rights working within bureaucracies – is important in bridging the divide between state feminism and grassroots feminism, particularly where there is not a strong gender-equality focused institutionalism (see, for example, Sawyer (1990) on Australia). Their role also raises the kinds of dilemmas that unfold when actors operate within the institutions – such as ‘neoliberal’ bureaucracies – that they might otherwise criticise: amplifying new voices and perspectives, generating new debates, and changing political practices, but also vulnerable to the charge that they have become complicit in ‘generating new capitalist logics’ (Newman 2012: 2–4).

Many policy solutions to gender inequality have arisen from work undertaken within such networks. Informal governance blurs the boundaries between grassroots feminist movements and state feminism, with alliances formed around specific issues, such as in the Norwegian ‘strategic partnership’ approach (Haalsa 1998). However, grassroots women’s movements have followed a route towards institutionalisation at the same time that states have responded to supranational strategic pressures on gender equality from bodies such as the UN and EU, so it is difficult to establish the venues in which feminist demands have been most heard (McBride et al. 2010).

Is Scottish Politics Relatively Conducive to Informal Governance?

In 1999, constitutional reform helped drive political reform, producing two informal governance measures conducive to a velvet triangle. First, foundational documents advertised more participatory and consensual ways of working (McGarvey and Cairney 2008: 12). The *Scottish Constitutional Convention* (1995) – a collection of political party, interest group, third sector, local authority, trade union, and religious leaders described ‘new Scottish

politics' as 'more participative, more creative, less needlessly confrontational' in contrast to 'old Westminster'. The Consultative Steering Group (CSG 1998), established by the UK Government to design the Scottish Parliament, produced four principles: 'power sharing', 'accountability', 'equal opportunities', and 'openness and participation'. Both made explicit reference to the representation of women, to encourage parties to select more women as candidates (SCC, which had a subgroup devoted to women) and provide a new institution more conducive to the participation of women (CSG).

Second, this new politics encouraged a distinctive 'Scottish policy style', built on more open and transparent consultation involving actors beyond the 'usual suspects' and a greater willingness to trust and delegate the delivery of policy to local public bodies (Cairney 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2013; Cairney and McGarvey 2013; Keating 2010). Early incarnations of the 'Scottish model' stressed the advantages of scale, combining the 'usual story of everybody knowing everybody else' (Keating et al. 2009: 57) with the sense that the Scottish Government could exploit its relatively small size, and central position in a network of public sector and third sector bodies (Cairney et al. 2016b). The aim was to produce more 'joined up' government, better able to solve wicked problems than 'traditional policy and operational solutions' based on 'the target driven approach which characterised the conduct of the UK Government' (Elvidge 2011: 31–35). Most recently, the 'Scottish Approach to Policymaking' was a vehicle to signal governance principles – stressing the 'assets' of local communities and benefits of 'coproducing policy' – and the use of 'improvement methodology' to help turn evidence into policy (Cairney 2016c; Housden 2014).

Yet, Scottish policy-making also reinforces our initial focus on key lessons for scientists: most policy is still made in venues out of the public spotlight; it takes time to understand which venues matter; and, the Scottish Government maintains at least three models of evidence-based policy-making – from uniform and central government-driven solutions

underpinned by randomised-control-trials, to local solutions built on storytelling between practitioners and service users – despite emphasising the value of improvement methods built on local policy experimentation by trained practitioners (Cairney 2015c, 2016b). There is also a huge difference between the Scottish Government's *reputation* for open and transparent consultation, which suggests that any actor can contribute to policy-making, and the *reality* of policy-making in systems which produce 'pre-consultation' and more exclusive group-government relationships. There is great opportunity for women's groups to be engaged, but an 'open door' to everyone provides little indication of substantive influence.

This reality of policy-making may diminish the sense that devolution promised a stark contrast to UK and EU politics that produce a sense of marginalisation in feminist groups. It offered a more open process in which previously excluded groups would be encouraged to engage, producing a potential irony that Scottish devolution might not initially prompt the perception of 'minority group' exclusion necessary for actors to think of gender as their primary identity (to transcend party politics and the dominant discourse of the day). Such relationships may only develop when day-to-day reality replaces rhetoric.

The Velvet Triangle and Scottish Social Policy

In that context, devolution provided an immediate 'window of opportunity' for the establishment of a formalised structure supporting co-operative policy making between the three corners of the Scottish velvet triangle. First, it prompted a rise of female political representatives. Of 129 Scottish Parliament seats, women secured 37% in 1999, 40% in 2003, 33% in 2007, and 35% in 2011 and 2016 (Cairney 2016d). Devolution *initially* doubled women's representation (women secured 18% of Westminster seats in 1997) before major convergence by 2015 (29%) (Cairney et al. 2016c: 7). Women's increased political representation does not lead per se to an increased policy focus on women's issues, but some evidence suggests

that women Scottish politicians see themselves as ‘feminising politics’ (Lovenduski 2005): acting for women, taking on women’s concerns, and making a difference to women’s lives. McKay and Gillespie (2005: 115) suggest that ‘the new political structures and processes have established transparent mechanisms to ensure that women’s voices across Scotland continue to be heard’. Alongside the growth in women’s political representation was what McBride et al. (2010) would recognise as distinctively gendered policy machinery, including the establishment of the Standing Group on Women and the Equalities and Budgetary Advisory Group, staffed by femocrats, to act as important scrutineers of legislation.

Second, the activist/social movement corner of the triangle was strengthened by new policy networks and the opportunity for legislative partnerships around specific devolved issues, such as the desire to strengthen services to tackle violence against women. This gave third sector organisations such as Scottish Women’s Aid (providing services for female domestic abuse survivors) and Engender (an umbrella feminist organisation working for gender equality) opportunities to create and sustain networks to press for policy change. Collective action by grassroots feminist actors have found structures and institutions amenable to the formation of new policy networks, which have proved to be a ‘useful example for the UK to follow’ (McKay and Gillespie 2005: 128), even if the reservation of many key areas of policy to Westminster has acted as a brake to some initiatives (such as to address women’s poverty).

Third, the foundation of the Scottish Parliament with legislative capacity gave new impetus to the relationship between academia and activism. The Scottish Women’s Budget Group drew together feminist academics in economics and social policy under the leadership of Professor Ailsa McKay to provide independent critical analysis of the new parliament’s budgetary decisions. The SWBG had a close and enduring working relationship with parliamentarians, and McKay was appointed as a member of the Expert Working Group on Welfare and Constitutional reform in 2012. Key members of

the Group are members of civic organisations such as Engender, and academic work regularly informs femocratic policy development and grassroots activism.

Alongside institutional changes was a normative change in politics: policy-makers often made the case for a distinctive ‘Scottish’ approach to find ‘Scottish’ solutions to ‘Scottish’ problems. It became possible for all three corners of the triangle to frame their claims for women in a way that made gender equality part of a distinctive Scottish political narrative. Women’s poverty and gender inequality have also become part of the Scottish policy ‘problem’ platform, based on women having ‘less access to income and other material resources, less time that is their own, less political power, and have one in five chance of experiencing domestic abuse in their lives’ (Strategic Group on Women 2003: 6).

A Velvet Triangle Strategy and its Limited Effect: A Cautionary Tale?

Rummery’s research indicates that there were several areas in which the Scottish velvet triangle claimed some success in achieving structural or policy changes. The first was to embed gender budgeting into the policy process of the Scottish – although this was not to the extent pursued by the third sector:

One of the principle outcomes has been the Equality Budget Statement which distinguishes Scotland from England, and Europe. It’s far from perfect, it’s still a narrative accompaniment to the budget, it’s not an Equality Impact Assessment of the budget although processes there are improving. [Academic, Scottish Women’s Budget Group]

The same respondent highlighted the need to frame arguments for policies within a context of aims and ideologies consistent with those of government:

it was framed originally around effectiveness and efficiency arguments, democracy arguments... then economic growth... in the last few years the articulation has been much more around responding to and challenging the Scottish Government’s overarching purpose of

sustainable economic growth – so challenging, growth for whom, what kind of growth, what’s meant by sustainable, and within that if you don’t have a gendered analysis of the economy then you are going to perpetuate the gender inequality. [Academic, Scottish Women’s Budget Group]

One respondent pointed to the dangers of such frames silencing women’s voices and a gendered perspective altogether:

It’s framed in tackling inequality, so things like a fairer tax system, investment in a social security state . . . by definition it would have tackled some of the inequalities that place women at a disadvantage . . . but nobody’s mentioned gender inequality, it’s like women are silenced again by their own narrative. [Trade Union Member]

Political stability since 2007 – the Scottish National Party has been in office continuously – offered some opportunities to develop lasting relationships and policy aims [Third Sector Childcare Organisation] but, in some cases, mitigated against working with the non-government parts of the triangle:

*I think it is because they don’t need to work with other parties, they can just push through what they want on their policy agenda, and that’s great if they want what you want, but I don’t think they hear us as well as they did. They *listen* but they don’t act on what we tell them. [Third Sector Gender Pay Organisation]*

A combination of effective framing and political stability led to success in areas of policy such as child care:

what has come forward in the Children and Young People Act in terms of increased childcare hours and what they are promising to do is transformational . . . the early learning and childcare commitment . . . it’s hugely positive in making sure that children get the best start in life. [Civil Servant]

However, highlighting the benefits to children of increased investment in child care moved the focus away from child care as a route to tackling gender inequality:

I’m absolutely delighted to see the discussion of childcare emerge, and I think we have Ailsa McKay to thank for that . . . but . . . I think it’s

about employability from the government’s perspective, employment in building paid labour market that more women access. There’s nothing wrong with that and it’s the fastest way to get women and therefore children out of poverty, but it’s not ambitious enough. [Third Sector Women’s Aid Organisation]

Personal contacts between key corners of the triangle were described as pushing forward progress:

Childcare is one of the most fantastic things in the White Paper [on independence], Ailsa McKay has to take a lot of credit for getting us to that position and she certainly had the ear of the First Minister and the cabinet generally. [Deputy First Minister]

Some respondents linked the focus on child care specifically to the SNP government’s desire to secure a Yes vote in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence:

We have moved the debate on . . . when we started it was about childcare that had a certain purpose . . . but that has shifted a bit towards doing something about the women’s vote in the referendum. [Third Sector Children’s Rights Organisation].

Overall, participants found that the benefits of a certain policy trajectory had to be framed to fit with the ideological and strategic goals of the government (sustainable economic development, rather than the rights of women or children) and that personal contacts between academia, the third sector and government, and a window of opportunity (in the shape of the referendum) played a significant part in prompting that policy trajectory. Yet, this new venue for informal governance did not translate into clear influence or a direct route for research impact on policy. Grassroots women’s movements formed an important part of the velvet triangle, but only engaged in political debates around specific issues, and when it was possible to frame arguments in a way that resonated with government policy. For example, while the academic corner – the SWBG – long advocated for increased child care provision, it was only when that claim could be framed as supportive evidence for Scottish independence

(in the debate from 2012) that it became a policy priority. This happened through Professor MacKay being seen as a key advocate for child care *and* independence. Further, this case for independence only became a distinctive part of the narrative when it became clear that women were key ‘swing’ voters, open to persuasion on the basis of policy promises.

At a commemorative lecture to mark her death in 2014, the former First Minister Alex Salmond said he regretted not taking McKay’s policies forward in his first ministerial stage: accentuating the potential for influence that remained largely unfulfilled for over a decade. Attempts to frame claims for investment in child care on the grounds of social justice and women’s equality failed repeatedly when there were few policy advocates within Government and a limited policy machinery to support it. Then, the velvet triangle of ‘soft’ relationships between grassroots movements, academia, and policy makers hardened around advocacy for independence, supporting specific pledges around investment in child care leading to a more economically sound, nuclear free, future for an independent Scotland (the ‘bairns, not bombs’ narrative). Although the electorate in Scotland rejected independence in 2014, it is not off the policy agenda. There remains a heightened policy focus on women’s equality and, for example, a greater ability to describe child care as part of the push for higher children’s academic attainment and economic growth, particularly when a small number of members of the movement – and *Women for Independence* in particular (including Freeman of the SNP) – ran successfully for Holyrood election in 2016 and made specific pledges on child care, equality, and reform.

Conclusion: Immense Effort for Limited Effect?

The phrase ‘evidence-based policy-making’ offers a vision of high-quality research having a direct and immediate impact on policy. It is soon accompanied by the phrase ‘policy-based evidence’ when researchers engage in politics, face several major obstacles, and decide that the policy process is dysfunctional. For example,

policy-makers may ignore issues and evidence for long periods, their search for evidence is unpredictable, and they seek any evidence that is useful to them at a specific point in time. Instead of becoming demoralised, researchers should (a) develop greater knowledge of the policy process and use it to, (b) respond positively to the ever-present effect of politics on policy-making, while (c) accepting that, even if they become skilled advocates for an evidence-informed cause, they may have limited or no success. Or, significant policy change after one or two decades of effort may represent major success.

This more realistic image of policy-making should help researchers weigh up the benefits and costs of effective engagement. Success is built on framing and storytelling rather than ‘the evidence’ speaking for itself, and forming alliances for the long term rather than expecting a quick and direct route to policy-makers. Consequently, policy engagement is not for everyone. It involves engaging with government agendas to which we would often object, investing precious research time in forming and maintaining networks, and giving up an image of objectivity (often a key resource for scientists portrayed as impartial experts) to pursue normative aims.

Yet, as our case study suggests, sometimes this hard work pays off, even if it takes over a decade and seems futile at the time. The ‘velvet triangle’ describes efforts by feminist academics to play a key role in networks between policy-makers and interest groups. Such engagement requires the long-term investment of time, and the willingness to frame evidence in terms of the government agenda of the day, in the hope that there will be a ‘window of opportunity’ to help policies for women to take off. In our case study of Scottish social policy, this pay-off began after a *decade* of devolution which initially promised a greater role for women in social policy development.***

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