

Forty Year Effort to Ascertain How Public Policy Evolves

Graham T.T. Molitor*

The Molitor Multi-Timeline Model encompasses my lifelong work and learning. Insights revealing how public policy issues emerge and are resolved stem from 40 years of experience in Presidential politics, governmental affairs, legal practice, and teaching forecasting techniques. My career-long activities and learning relentlessly have focused on ascertaining why and how public policy evolves. Serving governments in elective, appointive and advisory capacities — ranging from the White House to city hall, from international to state and local levels, and in judicial, legislative, executive and regulatory sectors — provided many rich and varied experiences enabling the writer to conceive and conceptualize some descriptive principles. Grounding in historic, worldwide, and impending developments spans a vast spectrum of issues. These views were embellished by managing research for two Presidential campaigns and serving as an advisor in others, along with research roles in senatorial, Congressional and New York mayoral campaigns. Organizing and editing an encyclopedia covering future perspectives on nearly 500 contemporary topics, and operating a forecasting consulting firm over the past 20 years provided further familiarization with diverse methods, issues, and state of the art techniques.

Practical application of concepts embraced 14 years of experience as a lobbyist for two *Fortune 500* companies. Teaching scores of college courses involving public policy issues, and conducting hundreds of semi-

*Graham T.T. Molitor, President, Public Policy Forecasting. Co-editor, *Encyclopedia of the Future* (Macmillan, 1996). Vice President and Legal Counsel, World Future Society. 9208 Wooden Bridge Road, Potomac, Maryland 20854. Phone and Fax: 1-301-762-5174.

nars on these topics sharpened concepts. Writing hundreds of papers and reports dealing with public policy change processes further sharpened innovative concepts.

Public Policy Forecasting, a business I founded 20 years ago, provided a venue for defining and describing empirical techniques for mapping issue environments and for ascertaining resulting trends, including their timing and disposition. Foundation support provided an initial opportunity to develop a multi-volume report describing over 100 techniques for spotting, monitoring, and anticipating public policy, sizing up obstacles and seizing opportunities. Voluminous reading, and 31 years of teaching social change processes provided additional insights that contributed to pinning down quantitative phenomena driving public policy change.

Educated as a political scientist and lawyer, I always maintained a keen interest in what gave rise to public policy issues. Public policies had to start somehow, and somewhere. As each issue came along, I pondered root causes that prompted the problem, advanced its deliberation, and drew events to a close. Developments influencing public policies both reveal and corroborate the way issues emerge and are resolved. This early warning system helps to take charge of issues, advance issues in a more responsible and logical manner, and can speed up implementation. Indicators were limited to quantitatively measurable ones that anybody with minimal instruction could master and apply.

Phenomena prompting change and the distinctive sequences characterizing them were integrated, piece-by-piece, into the Molitor Multi-Timeline Model of Change as they were discerned. Public policy change is prompted by at least 25 discrete signatures of change. What follows is an explanation of key elements in this model.

Techniques: "Signatures of Change" Comprising Molitor Multi-Timeline Model

My research has shown that public policy doesn't come about as a bolt out of the wild blue yonder. Processes involved are evolutionary and incremental. They progress through identifiable sequences reliably indicating future developments. Timelines mapping contemporary issue development shows that public policy evolves over a minimum of 6-12 years, though usually over spans of 23-100 years. Many recurring issues can be traced back through history to earliest civilizations.

Evolutionary timelines arraying build-up of public policy pressures step-by-step are characterized here as signatures of change. Sequenced arrays of several simultaneously developing elements provide a reliable gauge of the momentum driving issue development. The cumulative effect of these factors provides over a 90 percent reliability in pinpointing public policy resolution timing.

Basic signatures of change comprising the comprehensive Molitor Multi-Timeline Model, are grouped into three categories to facilitate description and understanding: 1. Framing the issues; 2. advancing them; and 3. resolving them

1. Framing Issues: Intellectual Development of New Ideas

Study of issues presupposes thorough knowledge of factors prevailing in the external environment that provide a basic backdrop for understanding the particular societal setting: natural resources, physical environment, human resources, educational status, social setting, economic system, political situation, technological capabilities, institutional infrastructure, and unusual factors.

The genesis of specific public policy problems commences with ideas, which leads to innovation (technological as well as social inventions), a practical application of abstract concepts and their practical application creates events...whose social impacts precipitate the issues.

2. Advancing Issues: Publicizing and Promoting Them

Emerging public policy developments sometimes are advanced by unusual phenomena influencing the pace of development. In other cases, trains of cyclical and linear phenomena carry along massive surges or waves of reform covering generic issue clusters.

Change agents, ranging from victims to intellectual elites, flesh out commentary. In turn, their views are picked up by communications media, thereby creating widespread awareness. Next, organizations form to address and sustain deliberations. Confluence of these occurrences shapes psychological attitudes with public opinion polls mirroring moods toward change. Catalysts, particularly shocking revelations, may swell public clamor for swifter remedial response.

3. Resolving Issues: Settling on Public Policy Solutions

Informal rules — unwritten codes of behavior — may settle matters, and always exert moral and ethical influences on outcomes. Informal settlements — including arbitration, mediation and conciliation — pro-

vide casual forums for resolving disputes (determinations may be enforced by government). Case-by-case litigation — judicial intervention — provides individual relief from social wrongs, and often highlights the need for legislative solutions providing across-the-board relief. Self-government responses — notably popular initiatives and referenda — often pinpoint matters not moving along fast enough or going far enough through traditional channels. Voluntary accommodation — self-policing by affected interests — may stave off formal regulation (and often is merely a waystation to mandatory laws of universal application).

Contractual arrangements provide legally competent parties a means to secure and sort out legal rights that are enforceable by courts of law.

Legislative response, involving 20-40 time-consuming steps in a typical bicameral system, interposes additional deliberation time. Quasi-legislative acts emanating from forums established to resolve specialized problems of a judicial or legislative nature (worker compensation boards, labor relations boards, and so on) sometimes are overlooked, but decisions rendered may provide a decisive impact. State and local government precursors (bellwethers/early adopters) test the mettle of legislated solutions. Nation-state precursors, concurrently responding to the same problems, usually are contemporary with — but sometimes ahead of — domestic precursors. Finally, new laws move toward implementation through executive-regulatory enforcement. Possible legal challenges posed in intermediary court systems provide still other opportunities for judicial review that may further delay finality of decisions. In extraordinary situations, constitutional revision that reverses, repeals or redefines final action may be superimposed. Revisions decreed by courts of last resort may start the entire public policy process anew.

Utility of The Molitor Multi-Timelines Model

The Molitor Multi-Trendline Model of Change renders what persons interested in public policy change often intuit into quantitative timelines that anybody can learn and apply. Templates of change, singly or in combination, provide insight into the trend, direction and timing of public policy response to specific situations. The basic schemata of public policy development conceptualizes commonsense observation of how the processes underlying decision making evolve.

Precursor Jurisdictions: A Key Telltale Indicator

In my model, the governments first to adopt and test new concepts are termed precursors, bellwethers, pacesetters, or leading jurisdictions. The basic principle remains the same: some jurisdiction has to be first and others follow. Lockstep response to same or similar issues by all jurisdictions at the same time is virtually impossible. Small vanguards of national, state, and local governments during any time in history consistently prove to be the most venturesome, experimental and progressive. Arrays of policies displayed by chronological adoption dates indicate likely timing sequences for response by laggards.

Within federated nation-states, a small vanguard of state and local domestic precursor jurisdictions provide a basis for anticipating likely adoption among lagging jurisdictions. Key domestic bellwethers include California, Massachusetts, and New York. These states typically are in the forefront of almost any public policy change. Internally, state and local government bellwethers respond years before the central government.

International diffusion tends to commence in Scandinavia, course through Western European nations, progresses to the U.K., moves to the U.S., followed by Canada, and then on to a tier of other economically advanced jurisdictions. Lesser developed countries lag far behind. Precursor Scandinavian and Western European nations typically precede U.S. Federal government response by 1-15 years, sometimes as much as 20-35 years — depending on the issue and other factors.

Sweden, Denmark, Norway, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom — since the end of World War II to present — consistently have comprised the initial tier of precursor nations. The U.S. is an early, but not a first adopter, and almost always follows the lead of Western Europe. Once an initial tier of 4-8 early adopter responses are established, convincing evidence of probable U.S. response can be estimated. Canada typically lags several years behind the U.S. on most issues. Laggards include the lesser developed nations such as Burkina Faso and Ghana that bring up the rear — if they act at all.

Sweden, a consistent social innovator, warrants special attention. Pace-setting programs in this nation provide a base of practical experience that has long proven a harbinger of things to come elsewhere. Pushing the envelope of change has won Swedes a sometime enmity of those begrudging innovation that challenges the status quo. On the other hand,

the small country has captured the admiration of others hopeful about prospects for improving things.

With the advent of transnational governmental organizations the speed and diffusion of public policy concepts has increased. Transnational organizations, especially ones pursuing uniformity among groups of countries, increasingly intercede to speed up the global diffusion process. Supranational government organizations, particularly the United Nations globally, and the European Community regionally, are in the forefront of organizations contributing to speedier diffusion.

4. Cyclic Phenomena: Useful For Sizing-Up Generic Issue Clusters

An important dimension of this change model involves recurring cyclic patterns — characterized as cycles, waves, warps, bursts or episodes — that provide epoch-long templates for anticipating further public policy development. Comprehensive lists of past, present, and prospective issues covering generic topics arrayed chronologically by adoption dates in bellwether jurisdictions highlight clusters of activity. This cyclic theory of public policy issue development is based on undergirding bursts of reform that accompany continuing efforts to resolve unfinished business and achieve never-ending incremental improvements. Each episode or era of activity reflects economic, social, political, and technological developments peculiar to the epoch. Cyclic depictions summarize and highlight a chronology of public policy development providing insight into the momentum, direction and timing of impending developments.

In general, contemporary cycles of socio-political reforms typically span 20-30 years. Duration of past cycles provides important insights into prospective specific developments, trends, timing, and outcomes of unresolved issues. The conclusions drawn are not unalterably predetermined, but do indicate momentum making outcome a highly deterministic surmise.

Impetus of overall cyclic patterns is mainly driven by economic cycles. Cycles of regulatory reform are powerfully influenced by the successive stages of economic dominance. Essentially, each cycle updates public policy controls associated with major economic stages through which societies progress. So far, advanced nations leading the way, have progressed through at least three dominant economic eras, are currently immersed in a fourth one, and seem destined to traverse through at least two additional identifiable eras. Bygone is the domineering importance of the 1. agrarian/extractive, and 2. industrial/manufacturing, and 3. ser-

vice based sectors. Contemporary dominance of the 4. knowledge/education/information era is about to be succeeded by an era dominated by impending 5. leisure/recreation/hospitality/entertainment entrepreneurial activity. In turn, the looming 5. bio-genetic/ life sciences sectors that will dominate technologically advanced nations beyond 2050 will intrude an entirely different range of public policy questions.

What most thinkers lose sight of is that cyclic patterns trace back thousands of year. Basic issues recur time and again, never fully disappear from the public agenda, and repetitively confront lawmakers whose job it is to resolve them. Many issues are associated with persistent human demands inevitably associated with societal institutions. Cyclic response to the self-same generic issues spans recorded history. Consumer laws, for example, date back nearly 4,000 years to the ancient Code of Hammurabi (King of Babylonia, 1792-1750 B.C.), and intermittently have been recurrently revisited and updated ever since then.

Generic issues evolve incrementally as refinements, extensions, and updates occur in response to new insights or developments. Generic issues undergo a never-ending succession of reforms involving clusters of unfinished and impending change. So regular has the progress of science and technological advance been, that the driving force prompting science-based updates may be visualized as more linear than cyclic. Periodic scientific breakthroughs that revamp entire disciplines punctuate the socio-political landscape. Response and readjustment patterns, spread out over a period of time necessary to accommodate change, tend to smooth out these episodic bursts. Cyclic or linear — perspectives vary with the time period used to conceptualize the phenomena.

Factors associated with cyclic change include, but are not limited to a wide variety of factors and influences: periodic lifestyle and value changes; surges of social political activism; swings between liberalism and conservatism; oscillation between centralization and decentralization; episodic technological advance; rates of knowledge growth; ceaseless elaboration and refinement of issues that never are fully or finally finished; and intermittent periods of military adventurism.

Cyclic phenomena involve many different issues. The Molitor Cyclic Model describing periodic bursts of public policy activity applies to many issue categories. This anticipatory framework of socio-political reform has proved valid for a growing number of generic issues to which it has been applied:

- food and drug laws;
- non-prescription drug sales;

- air pollution;
- water pollution;
- electromagnetic field safety;
- social-welfare policies and programs;
- pesticide regulations;
- packaging material controls;
- advertising restraints;
- nutrition labelling;
- nutrition education/information programs;
- medium of economic exchange (coinage, currency, etc.);
- vicarious criminal liability;
- energy controls;
- transportation rules.

Continuing Expansion and Elaboration of the Molitor Multi-Timeline Model

Change is omnipresent. It knows no horizon. Change never is foreclosed to incessant tinkering. Human nature, motivated to seek and strive toward something better, perpetually finds it just out of reach. Consequently, constant search for something better, new or novel never ends. Thus while many futurists focus on discontinuities, my work is focused on historic continuity and the host of factors prompting never-ending change. G.K. Chesterton described these patterns of history as the “prophetic past.” Insight into history’s dynamics open up opportunities to improve and advance the tides of human progress. That is what my quest to define and describe “signatures of change” is all about.