

Pursuing policy advocacy in a post-recommendation world: moving beyond the ‘smackdown’ of the alpha paradigms

Almost all policy advocacy reports and studies, whether progressive or conservative, conclude with a series of recommendations. The same recommendations are often included in an executive summary. Either the authors or the institution on whose behalf the piece is written want something to be done or something to be changed.

They often place their recommendations in a bold font or capital letters. A majority of recommendations – my own straw poll – are vague. They simply ask for something to be done. Others stipulate what entity should fulfill the recommendations – usually governments.

Some recommendations are set out in stages – baby steps – while others stipulate dates for actions to be completed.

Having recommendations in policy advocacy reports and studies seems to be mandatory; like love and marriage, horse and carriage. They just go together. They are a rite of passage. How can you have a report without recommendations?

Recently, in the work that I do and the reports that I write, I have tried to stay away from recommendations as such. There are no recommendations in The Cost of Poverty in Toronto¹. There are no recommendations in A Basic Income for Canadians: What would change?²

I haven't recommended anything in my recent blogs such as Saks in the City: Labour Market Inequality in Toronto seen through the lens of the retail divide³.

The reason I have stopped making recommendations is that I believe that we are living in a post-recommendation world characterized by an overarching ‘smackdown’ battle of the two alpha paradigms.

In 2011, in an essay I titled Turn out the lights, I wrote:

“...we have a battle of the paradigms and a debate among narratives: reduction vs. stimulus, spending vs. saving, and consumption vs. belt tightening.

*These two 'alpha' narratives slide and grate against each other like the tectonic plates of modern discourse -- each winning for a time -- constantly erupting along the fault lines between them*⁴.

¹ <http://openpolicyontario.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Cost-of-Poverty-R10-Final-forweb.pdf>

² <http://metcalfoundation.com/stories/publications/a-basic-income-for-canadians/>

³ [Labour Market Inequality in Toronto seen through the lens of the retail divide](#)

⁴ <http://openpolicyontario.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Turn-Out-Lights-oct311.pdf> - p.10

The term ‘smackdown’ comes from professional wrestling. It is defined by the Oxford dictionary as:

“1. *A bitter contest or confrontation.*

or

2. *A decisive or humiliating defeat or setback.*⁵”

At the time, I thought that the smackdown between the two alphas would be over soon. I felt that it could not go on. I also tried to describe the battle in the following table that I use in a policy course I teach:

Smackdown battle of the Alpha Paradigms: The paradigms and their elements		
Name	Progressive Frame	Conservative frame
Element	The Stimulus Paradigm: Borrow, Tax, Spend, Invest	Market as King, personal freedom Paradigm: Reduce and restrain
Taxes	Maintain or increase for services, infrastructure. investments, community	Reduce taxes at any point, at any level relentlessly or taxes will creep up on you and pay for things not in your interest
Legitimacy of Taxes	Fundamentally legitimate: - how we live and survive	Fundamentally Illegitimate and suspect: - how we weaken our citizenry
Government	A reflection of the public good as a nation, provinces, cities and communities	Only in place for our protection against crime, natural disaster, and to protect our borders against bad people, bad events and bad nations
Families	Strengthen the family through infrastructure, social security and civil protections	Leave families to grow through less taxation and regulation. Allow them to flourish with the minimum level of outside intervention.
Individuals	Support individuals through civil protections	Individual freedom through fewer regulations, less red tape, lower taxes, greater competition
Inequality	An ongoing and pervasive concern - the worry that	The natural state of the world - a positive because those who do well are in a

⁵ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/smackdown>

Smackdown battle of the Alpha Paradigms: The paradigms and their elements		
	those at the top have too much, much more than they need	position to help those who do not thrive - not a fundamental concern
The Economy	Prosperity through investment, taxation and responsible government	Prosperity only through lower taxation, measured deregulation, private sector spending and investment
Environment	Green energy and alternatives. carbon restraint	'Drill baby drill' - state to protect against spills and harm
Poverty	An important concern, a need to resolve through investment, income and social security, strategic interventions	An individual deficit that it is important that the individual overcome on their own with as little help as possible. Also a place for charity for the helpless.
Crime	Important to do what is effective - deterrence and rehab important	If you do the crime, you do the time ... Protection and punishment most important
Future	Positive on investment	Positive only if less taxes, private sector growth
Youth	An investment - the world could be ok	Only good future is with less tax, less government, otherwise negative
Growth	Necessary but judicious	Only if achieved through less government and private sector growth
Smackdown Verdict	Wins on fear of recession , loses in normal life	Loses on fear of recession , Wins in everyday life

When the alpha paradigms do battle, the alpha frame determines what the recommendations will be. Listen to what progressives say when it comes to recommendations for social programs:

- End Homelessness
- Reduce inequality
- Provide good jobs
- Make more affordable housing available
- Raise incomes and wages
- Implement better supports
- Mandate universal childcare
- Build infrastructure
- Reduce carbon emissions
- Make health care affordable to all

It sounds familiar because it is. Most progressive reports will call for any or all of the above innovations. If we know what's going to be said, and we have been saying it for years, is there real merit in repeating it?

In contrast, the conservative frame tends to have an opposite slate of recommendations that is equally familiar:

- Reduce government expenditures
- Lower taxes
- Increase prison sentences
- Respect Canadian values
- End handouts
- Deregulate
- Cut through red tape
- Balance budgets
- Reduce debt
- Build more pipelines

Both sides accost politicians with their elevator speeches, their reports and their news releases and it's all become white noise, blahblahblah, and the new din.

Dictionary.com defines ‘din’⁶ as:

“A loud, confused noise; a continued loud or tumultuous sound; noisy clamour”.

In other words, the din of the smackdown of the alpha paradigms cancels each other out. What the one side wants would shut down the other. They cannot co-exist. They battle to an endless and prolonged draw. But they declare no truce; no armistice. They just continue to duke it out.

As recipients of a thousand elevator speeches from both sides, governments often try to appease both sides. They try to balance budgets while implementing progressive policies and most often fail to do either. This creates a fundamental weakness in the commons that allows other voices to rise.

Moving beyond the ‘smackdown’ of the alpha paradigms

There is just one way to move beyond the smackdown of the alpha paradigms that define a post recommendation world.

It is to build a whole new set of recommendations outside the paradigms within an entirely new paradigm. Rob Ford, Boris Johnson, and Donald Trump each achieved this. ROFO, BOJO and Trump each disrupted the alpha paradigms and forged wholly new frames of reference.

They called for bike lanes to be painted over in Toronto, a new Independence Day for Britain and a wall to be built between the US and Mexico; entirely new stuff outside the alpha paradigms.

And it rises above the din. While the alpha paradigms are fighting, pummeling each other to death, the commons weakens and the outsiders are able to enter the playing field. Their principal credential is that they have none. They are proud outsiders.

But just as ROFO, BOJO and Trump ‘rose above the din’, progressive thinkers can and must do the same.

We can start by abandoning the usual set of recommendations that are completely neutralized by the other side. We can follow this by paying attention to the frame in which our speeches are made and making it new.

We can devise a much larger ‘balance sheet’ where the costs of inaction are measures against the costs of reform.

⁶ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/din>

We can stop talking inside the echo chamber of our progressive base and reach out to understand the values and aspirations of others. We can connect our proposed actions to show how they assist those who would never dream of supporting a progressive cause.

We can examine our own value frame and realize that evidence is framed and informed by values. We can articulate those values.

We can realize that when we call for evidence-based decision making, we mean for decision makers to adopt our values without articulating the values that underlie it.

Finally, we can cede our voice to those with lived experience of the problems and issues that we are trying to correct. Their voices are strong while ours are weak.

We need to start today because the new victors in reframing the modern world are avowed outsiders. They are winning because they recognized the inherent weakness of two alpha paradigms that, weakened by internecine warfare, have lost their collective capacity to dominate the political and policy commons.

Let's not lose to outsiders.

Postscript

I have asked a number of people if they noticed anything different about my reports these days. I mentioned several reports that had no recommendations as examples. Did they notice anything structurally different? I received a lot of blank stares.

Then I said to them that none of these reports had any recommendations. The stares were equally as blank. Many asked: "Really?" They were surprised.

But the interesting thing is that they hadn't noticed. That's the litmus that we live in a post-recommendation world.

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