

Wonk Licensing

Time for Washington to Create a Policy Support Program

By: Doug Bandow, a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute

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For years I've been working within the beltway, attempting to promote limited government and individual liberty. I believe that we all would benefit from shrinking the state—its regulatory reach, budgetary demands, and various other controls, impositions, and exactions.

However, I have noticed one problem that requires government attention. It's time for a determined national effort to improve the policy process. Over the (many) years I've been at work, I've seen the quality of policy arguments decline. Perhaps that's why the laws enacted are getting so much worse. Heck, Uncle Sam of IRS and post office fame is taking over America's health care system. Something has evidently gone very wrong.

I think the basic problem is the surplus of would-be policy advisers. Almost anyone believes himself or herself to be qualified to write an op-ed piece or concoct a policy study. The result is a flood of material, most of which is not worth the spot of cyberspace it occupies. At the same time—not that this would influence my thinking, of course—compensation for writing and thinking has dropped. Most websites want you to write for free, while newspapers increasingly seem to think of themselves as websites in this regard.

The first step is to limit the supply by licensing policy practitioners. If we shouldn't have incompetent lawyers and hairdressers, then obviously we shouldn't have incompetent policy analysts. The government should set minimum educational standards. A Ph.D. or equivalent should be required. No more half-baked proposals from people with just a masters!

Putative policy mavens also should have to pass a test, the political equivalent of the lawyer's bar exam. They should have to answer questions on the Constitution—heck, most congressmen would fail such an exam today. There also should be questions on economics, history, and geopolitics. Policy people should know that restricting the price lowers the supply and that sort of thing.

Finally, the government should require membership in a public policy association to regulate the profession. Should anyone be found to make persistently unsound proposals, he or she should be disbarred, as it were. A lawyer stealing a client's money is bad. A certified policy expert misleading the public is far worse. Repeat offenders would earn a ban for life, forbidden from ever again entering the field.

Of course, those of us already in practice should be grandfathered in. It doesn't make sense for existing policy analysts to have to interrupt their careers to go through the approval process.

However, certification could become a normal part of the job for anyone entering the field. Then they could decide whether they wanted to proceed, making certification voluntary after a fashion.

Still, sanctions are not enough to ensure good policy advice. Once the licensing system is established, thereby culling out misfits and fools, the government should ensure an adequate income for those who remain. That seems only fair, given the importance of the work that we do. Uncle Sam should establish a policy support system along the lines of agricultural price supports.

Washington should look back to when it was possible to actually make a living from writing. Then it should establish “parity” fees for articles, policy studies, books, and television appearances. When current pay falls short—which is almost always—the government should make up the difference.

Of course, the result might be a surplus of articles, just like Uncle Sam manages to pile up milk and cheese in government warehouses. In this case, however, nothing would go to waste. The government could simply publish anything that didn’t make it into an established journal or newspaper. With the Internet, the cost of doing so would be minimal. Then the ideas would all be available to anyone who was interested, while licensed policy analysts would finally make the kind of money they deserve.

Congress could creatively address other potential problems. For instance, a certain “pack mentality” sometimes grips the policy community. One issue or another wins public attention, so all of the foreign policy analysts want to write about Syria or all of the domestic policy people decide to hold forth on the budget. In such times the government should pay analysts not to write on a particular topic. While it is important to encourage good policy analysis, it is equally important not to provide too much material, even if it’s good. Why? Because that drives down compensation, and John Q. Public can’t get through it all anyway.

This solution would have the ancillary benefit of encouraging people who tend to live and die by the news cycle to take some time off. Analysts could relax when they were being paid not to produce. They would feel no pressure to keep churning out duplicative material on issues already more than adequately covered by others.

None of this should be thought of as an attempt to win special privileges for those laboring in the policy field. Rather, both regulation and subsidies would be a means to improve the practice of policy for the benefit of the general public. Only the truly selfless, like yours truly, are willing to devote their lives to fill this pressing need.

Yes, the campaign to shrink government must continue. But it’s important not to be unnecessarily rigid in this regard. Only Washington can improve the quality of the policy analysis upon which we all rely.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of a number of books on economics and politics. He writes regularly on military non-interventionism.