

A few weeks ago I was reading Ta-Nehisi Coates' *We Were Eight Years in Power*. In it he shares eight essays he wrote over the years Barack Obama was president, alongside personal reflections of what was happening in his life at the time. One essay includes the following:

"The ghettos of America are the direct result of decades of public-policy decisions: the redlining of real-estate zoning maps, the expanded authority given to prosecutors, the increased funding given to prisons. And all of this was done on the backs of people still reeling from the 250-year legacy of slavery. The results of this negative investment are clear—African Americans rank at the bottom of nearly every major socioeconomic measure in the country."¹

I couldn't get the paragraph out of my head: public policy, weaponized for exclusion and disenfranchisement. For decades policy shielded privilege by sidelining American citizens based on race. I'd always understood policy as a lever for extending the reach of the American Dream, a way to further national ideals of liberty and justice, but Coates highlights how America used it against its black citizens. Municipalities, states and the federal government ensured white success on the backs of a black underclass. It was a shock, one that left a bitter taste, and it wasn't isolated: Dawnland, a film about indigenous Mainers, lays bare the impact of policy on local people, right here, right now.²

I am enrolled in a masters program studying public policy, and yet I have heard no mention of the implications of race on policy, historical or otherwise. Mass incarceration, stop and frisk, border separation, police shootings, indigenous rights — public policy is embedded in each, and yet at Muskie's MPPM we barely touch on them. So too with gender, sexual orientation, cultural identity. In studying public policy at Muskie these are either tangential, or missing entirely.

From the balcony, it is clear the conversation around policy is shifting. Long held cultural norms that governed how policy was both made and implemented are being challenged. In the wake of Donald Trump's election, #MeToo, the rise of white nationalism, the reexamination of Confederate icons and more, Americans have been forced to question long held beliefs about equality, equity and

¹ (n.d.). My President Was Black - The Atlantic. Retrieved December 8, 2018, from

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-president-was-black/508793/>

² (n.d.). Synopsis – DAWNLAND. Retrieved December 9, 2018, from <http://dawnland.org/synopsis/>

justice. Pressure from indigenous groups, minorities, feminists, the LGBTQ+ community and others are provoking a new look at historical narratives, as well as how things are done today. 2018 saw the first Native American and Muslim women elected to congress,³ and three transgender candidates won election to state legislatures.⁴ The last four presidential elections included either a woman or a person of color on a major party ticket. This is not a momentary shift, but a realignment of who has access to power, and with this realignment comes changes in how power is wielded. The old public policy norms are out. The implications of race, gender, culture and sexual identity are now up for discussion, even among white men. Past indiscretions are coming to light. The old assumptions are over.

The Muskie School is “Maine’s distinguished public policy school,”⁵ but in this new landscape it has been caught flat footed. Race, cultural identity and other complex factors are absent from Muskie classrooms. Most of the curriculum focuses on technical training, or is at best a polite discourse among white people. Muskie fails to venture into the ugly past of American public policy, or Maine’s, to examine how old biases were canonized into policy and wreaked havoc on communities. Muskie claims to train future leaders, but it lacks the resolve to engage in tough conversations around history and diversity.

This is an adaptive challenge, and it is multifold: Muskie exists in one of the least diverse states, so issues that are deafening elsewhere are but a whisper in Maine; the school suffered financial hardship and leadership turmoil, so revamping the curriculum is not an administration priority; as a professional program students have limited time and focus to tackle complex conversations; the student population lacks the diversity of USM’s undergraduate population, muting the insistence on diverse perspectives; it’s easier to both teach and learn technical skills, so there is a disincentive to undertake a difficult change both among students and faculty.

Without a doubt, however, Muskie faces dire consequences if it refuses to recognize this shift and update its public policy program. The big issues of today — climate change, mass incarceration, stop and frisk, indigenous rights, addiction and recovery, #MeToo, the gender pay gap, immigration reform, family separation — are rife with cultural implications. Public policy in the future will

³ (2018, November 6). First Muslim women in Congress: Rashida Tlaib and ... - CNN.com. Retrieved December 8, 2018, from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/06/politics/first-muslim-women-congress/index.html>

⁴ (2018, November 11). Transgender Candidates in the U.S. - Logan Casey. Retrieved December 8, 2018, from <https://www.loganscasey.com/trans--candidates-project>

⁵ (n.d.). Overview | Muskie School of Public Service | University of Southern Retrieved December 8, 2018, from <https://usm.maine.edu/muskie/overview>

require more than technical expertise; it will require cultural understanding and a wide historical perspective. Muskie, however, is not leading conversations that develop such depth. Muskie trains students on *HOW to make policy* but does not equip them with the skills to ascertain *whether said policy is JUST*. These graduates will stand poised to repeat the mistakes of the past, not lead, and the Muskie student body knows it. They sense something is lacking. Muskie lives within an institution that regularly engages these questions, but the discourse inside the program is hollow. If it does not change, Muskie will cease to be relevant.

How can I serve as a leader to force the Muskie School to face this adaptive challenge? By articulating the problem and creating a sense of urgency. I can reach out to other students who recognize the leadership positions of tomorrow will require a cultural fluency that a Muskie education currently lacks and ask them to raise their concerns with the administration. I can coordinate a student campaign to Firooza Pavri, the director of the Muskie School of Public Service, and Dr. Yuseung Kim, the MPPM chair, protesting the lack of conversation about how race and culture impact public policy. I can petition the USM Intercultural and Diversity Advisory Council, the Muskie Board of Visitors and the Muskie Student Organization, as well as accrediting agencies such as NASPAA, to weigh in. I can coordinate student opinion pieces in the USM Free Press, the Portland Press Herald and the Bangor Daily News highlighting the silence within the program about race, gender and culture. I can recruit allies within the university who view these subjects as integral to any public policy education.

The aim is to generate a sense of urgency and discomfort among Muskie administrators, an urgency without ready solutions, and force them to generate ideas. Student voices can create a pressure cooker, point out how Muskie is lagging rather than leading, and then leave Muskie administrators and faculty to consider ways to solve it.

As a student, I do not have direct power over the curriculum, administrators or the MPPM program. Students can only lead from below. But students recognize something is lacking and are willing to speak up. Will Muskie's leadership be open to listening? Does the organization embrace "leadership as learning"? Are they willing to be uncomfortable? That's unclear. The school could ignore us, and wind up lumbering on, a dinosaur churning out technocrats without the tools for modern policymaking. That march would end in obsolescence. Should the adaptive challenge facing the program be made clear, however, and leadership recognize the reality on the horizon, Muskie might distinguish itself as an institution that trains policy leaders ready to face tomorrow's challenges.