

The Business of Policymaking Podcast

Episode 1 – In conversation with Janez Potočnik

Speakers: Jana Javornik and Janez Potočnik

[00:00:00] **Janez:** I mean, creating and understanding science does not guarantee that you will be able to share your work in the best and the most understandable and useful way. This requires special skills. And to be frank, it's hard to learn it.

[00:00:22] **Jana:** Welcome to the Business of Policymaking - the new podcast from Leeds University Business School with myself, Jana Javornik, and produced by Hannah Preston. My guest today is Dr Janez Potočnik, a two-time European Commissioner responsible for the science and research portfolio up until 2010, when he introduced the European Research Council, and then took over the environment portfolio.

Today, Dr Potočnik holds a number of roles in various supranational organisations in the area of environment and climate change, as you can see from his bio, available in the episode notes. Janez is someone I've known for very long. He was my very first boss at the Institute of Macroeconomic Analysis and Development of the Republic of Slovenia, and we both joined the European Commission in 2004.

The main reason I want to talk to him today is his vast experience in policymaking at various levels. As a senior policymaker, Janez offers a unique insight into the daily life of a decision maker, the role of academic research in informing policy agenda and a role of wider politics, but also shares some top tips on how to engage with different communities.

We hope you enjoy listening to our conversation.

[00:01:44] **Jana:** Janez, thank you very much for joining me today. I'm very excited to have you on the show. In the past and in the policy world, many have accused universities of behaving more like corporations, ignoring the ecosystems in which they operate. Often there's an impression that research is influential if it gets published in a top tier journal. In your various roles, including your responsibility as a Commissioner for Research, how did you understand and envisage the societal role of scientific or academic research? More precisely, what, if any, role should academic research play in informing, setting policy agendas, in their implementation, their evaluation?

[00:02:27] **Janez:** Let me try to answer in a brief summary. Informing is without any doubt important. Setting policy agendas, yes, but it's less obvious than informing. Well, when it comes to implementation, evaluation, of course, the best judge is always time.

When I was responsible for science and research portfolio, I've always had a bit of a problem with how this evaluation of scientific work should be done and how it's best done. You certainly know the famous Faraday's answer linked to electricity: It is so important that you tax it.

It's difficult to know what actually will make the difference, serious difference, and what will not. But let me turn to some of the facts which I think are linked to academic research.

First, we would hardly find anybody in the policy world who would, at least in theory, claim that policymaking should not be based on good knowledge.

In the European Commission, for example, for each proposal we had a so-called impact assessment in which different elements of the proposal were evaluated. And the real question and the real dilemma was what impact assessment should include.

Should it include only economic parts? Should it include also environmental and health consequences? And so on. Academic research as such is of course seen as unbiased research. Research which does not have a kind of interest base, like sometimes it's the research which is happening in corporate institutions, in corporate business sector, and it's always considered as very reliable.

As you know, one of the questions, which is also frequently on our tables, is related to - because, as long as science exists, there will be different answers and, what, of course, a policymaker needs is assurance. Feeling that you are on the right side and that you are using the right data.

I think one of the directions which I like, and by the way, I'm co-chairing one of those, is how you actually create a critical mass of science. Like we have it in climate change, the IPCC, like we have it in the area of biodiversity loss, IPBS. And I'm, as you probably know, co-chairing the International Resource Panel.

But even if there is clear scientific evidence, you have no guarantee that science will be used in the most sincere and impactful way, because it is clear that policymakers are also human, like anybody else, and they have their own agendas, which they want to defend.

And sometimes it's cherry picking and you use this part of science, which actually is best fitting into your agenda. When you asked also about the research on the European Union level, of course, there are different programmes. I don't know exactly what is the structure of the current programme, but certainly there will always be programmes which will be trying to address societal needs, so-called thematic areas.

Then there will be programmes which will deal with scientific frontiers. By the way, I was the one who established the European Research Council, and I think it did not take long to prove that it's probably the most effective instrument which we have ever had on the European Union level.

Currently, colleagues are trying to establish a good link and bridge to the innovation. And that's why some of the projects, or better to say programmes, are also linked to private-public relations and how you basically establish that kind of cooperation.

By the way, in the European Commission we have also in-house research. It's called the Joint Research Centre. There are a few of the centres around the European Union. I was responsible for that.

But the colleagues were actually more or less taking the benefits when I was Science and Research Commissioner. We provided input to various areas which colleagues covered.

So, policymakers, in short, receive really lots of inputs from this is our task, so we need to listen to everybody. On the science it's of course a kind of a guiding direction. You have the business sector, you have civil society, and I think it's really important. Then you have consumers, you have trade associations and so on, and you are bound to listen to everybody because that's your role.

What is at the end? Your decision is of course your own responsibility, but all those which I was mentioning are, in one or another way, quoting science and coming with scientific facts in front of you.

What I have sensed in all those years is that, in particularly now when I'm out of the side where, where I was responsible for funding, but now more on the side when I'm receiving some of the funding support, is that there is a fundamental lack of funding for complex and system change related questions.

Which is simply seen as too complicated, obviously, or not attractive enough. So, foundations are simply not funding that, and the only logic would be that the public sector would fund that. And, public sector, it's sometimes simply too cumbersome. Or, again, too much looking into different separate parts and not to connectivity of those parts in the most, most needed way, which would be, by the way, needed to by the policymaker.

And which leads also to the fact that policymakers then often use that kind of argumentation, which does not always lead to the most unconflicting and useful decisions from that knowledge base.

But, to conclude this first part and just to say: when you look at public opinion polls, it's pretty straightforward and clear. They trust most scientists and they trust least politicians. When you are on the policy side, you have to take that into account. And of course, if you want to improve the, a kind of acceptance of the things which you try to do, you are quite a lot trying to be knowledge-based, look to those sources.

But again, you have seen various kinds of examples, including COVID recently, that it's simply not enough. A lot of public media are allowing an enormous possibility of manipulation. On one the hand they are an excellent base for informing people, but on the other hand, they're also an excellent base for manipulating them.

And you know that we are normally guided based on fears. Often, this is an easy way to run some of the policies in directions which are actually not really in the public interest, and which are pretty much short-sighted.

[00:10:32] **Jana:** What you're describing here, Janez, is really something that's far more complicated and I think the picture you are painting really shows that. What I have witnessed as both a policy scholar and a policy adviser, there's a kind of disjointed incrementalism instead of a comprehensive model of policy planning.

Very often there's this impression that there's a linear process. And whatever happens in between is just magic. But as you've mentioned yourself in combination with a recent pandemic, this has affected and disrupted national research and higher education institutions as well, their ability to understand and flexibly respond to and integrate national and international policy frameworks into

our institutional research strategies. Obviously, we try to be in touch and focus on what's out there, in the policy world, but it's becoming ever more convoluted and ever more challenging.

You have worked in very mixed teams, multidisciplinary, and you yourself regularly collaborated with academics. You also actively created opportunities for and invited academic research into decision making processes. You encourage debates and knowledge exchanges, even in countries where these aren't as natural as one would think. Why, and how, and who did you reach out to?

[00:11:53] **Janez:** Yeah. As you know, I'm an economist. So, unfortunately one learns pretty quickly in policy world (that) a lot of the, how to convince your colleagues and the best way to actually get your proposals approved is to have good economic arguments, which actually helped me a lot to understand the arguments, how to convince the colleagues.

I was trying to use their language to basically persuade them. I think in policymaking one has to look at the interest of the portfolio where he or she's standing. My understanding was always that co-operation was much better than winning against somebody else because winning is in the end losing both.

But maybe somebody in the short time believes that the benefits of the short-minded current situation prevail, but it's simply not like that. I think it's really important that you are able to step into other shoes, try to understand them, but on the other hand have clearly in your mind what you want to achieve and what is the end of the tunnel where you would like to reach.

So when we were working with the colleagues, I'm also the member of the Club of Rome, with the colleagues from the Club of Rome and SYSTEMIQ on trying to identify which are the major bottlenecks and why the things are as they are, we came to the conclusion that the policymaking is simply something which we have already mentioned. It's too much looking to a kind of silo way of approach. It's not connecting various kinds of areas. If I explain it, for example, in the most known climate change approach, getting net zero, greenhouse gases 2050, whatever it'll cost.

I have the problem with this part of the sentence, "whatever it will cost". One needs always to look to new lock-ins, which you are creating and trying to put the things in and rather for whatever it'll cost, make it with "at least cost". So, we know that this is needed, that it's beneficiary, but of course many of the decisions which you are taking have consequences for the other areas, which you need to take into account.

The second bottleneck, which we have actually identified was the fact that, we are many times, staying on the surface and not really going to the drivers and pressures, entities, drivers and pressures which are leading the game, and which are the core reason why we are where we are. In that I'm meaning we don't go often enough to the core of the use of the access and use of natural resources, which is at the core of practically all historical developments. Access and use of natural resources were always the base for the wellbeing of nations. That's why resource imperialism and colonialism were part of the game, but they were also pretty much the core reasons for conflicts, wars and, and also for the inequality, which is currently existing in the world. So going to that, it's pretty much not part of the agenda as well as going to the market signals, which are currently pretty much really sending producers and consumers, I have to say clearly, in the wrong direction.

And the third bottleneck, which we have identified is that we do not admit that actually something is wrong with the economic system that we have created. We want to make the economic system as

efficient and better but not really change it. And this will not work. We stay pretty much on the supply side and don't ask the question "who is actually responsible for this wastefulness, and who is behaving in a way that this has then the wastefulness consequences".

When I was in the Environment, one of the things which you learn is that you are responsible for all the problems, but solutions are pretty much in the hands of your colleagues. You need to make coalitions, you need to go talking to them, persuading them. You need to listen to various interest groups.

I think this is all part of the job which you have. And, when it comes to the use of science, because you asked also how, I think a very nice example was, if you remember, the Dieselgate, which was connected to Volkswagen. That was the exhausts, how they were measured, and so on.

In particularly Knox, which was pretty much not under our attention. And, it was on the basis of our internal research, which we have done in the Joint Research Centre, that we have somehow revealed that some problems exist there, and we pointed them there. And then, as you know, this pretty much sped up the whole transition also in the automotive sector.

It's hard to say for the policy level itself, where it's used more or less. Did we use it more on EU level or, for example, on national level, because I was working on both levels. You try on both levels. You always connect, you always build some kind of scientific advisory groups and so on, and you always try to connect with that.

But to be entirely honest, there are two ways to build that. One is to tick the boxes and the other is that you basically use it effectively and seriously, that you are sincere in putting those things together. And I have seen both. I think it's really important that you keep your integrity, and this is the best and the most important thing in the relationship between a policymaker and a scientist or somebody who is providing you the knowledge.

[00:18:05] **Jana:** You've raised a number of points also for, I think, at least three different podcasts, which hopefully we will make at some point. But there is one thing that I think for our listeners could be incredibly useful. You've mentioned that you are setting up and building different scientific advisory groups.

And there's one question I'm often asked: How does one get into a scientific advisory group?

[00:18:29] **Janez:** How does one get into... Yeah, it is normally a Commissioner or somebody on the top who decides about those things. You always must build around yourself a strong team. So that's the most important for any politician to have a strong team around you because you are as strong as people around you are strong because you can do only as much as you can do.

You have 24 hours and an important part of that is sleeping, of course. So, you can't do more than that. And you need to have good people around you. And you need to well exploit also those parts of institutions which belong to you. And these are two important things. And when talking about those scientific groups which you build around you, you normally ask them to provide you with input.

Which means that they probably scan how much impactful they are, how much they are already quoted, how much they are already present, how much they're already active. Normally we were always searching for those who were there to go out and show that they are ready to publicly say something and be active. Because those who are basically helping you in those processes that you basically reach far. Since I'm also in the International Resource Panel, some scientists are active, some are simply less active.

And, you don't want to have non-active scientists around you. So, some are there just to be there, and some are there because it's a lot of investment of work and some simply don't either want or don't have time to invest that time. And that's why you gain some experience from the past, who were those who were really contributing and doing well.

It is normal to keep them or that you try to involve them, also in the future. I think this is the best way to answer how they are selected.

[00:20:35] **Jana:** Now this is incredibly useful and thank you for this honest insight. It's a rare opportunity to have a person of your profile. I think your experiences with really high profile national, supranational, international organisations, you've covered them all, including the range of policy, actors, ecosystems, really provide a unique understanding of the policy landscape, of the policy cycle, the language, the players, the timelines that policy works towards.

And you've shared a lot of that today. But I think very often it is really underestimated the time constraints on which high level decision makers operate. And like we've often discussed, that kind of, it gives an entirely new meaning to the elevator pitch because often this is the time you get.

This can be a source of frustration and the reason knowledge transfer or exchanges between academia and policy world fail.

Could you walk us through a typical working day of a senior policy maker? The dynamic, the rhythm, the time pressure, the multiple roles, the demands, the work process, work organisation, the group of people you work with on a typical day?

[00:21:44] **Janez:** Sure. Okay, let's start my day. Normally each day we have had a cabinet meeting. Let's say Cabinet meeting starts at nine o'clock. I was never present from the beginning, so it was the Head of the Cabinet who was leading that meeting. But if it was possible, if I was physically there, I was always entering the Cabinet meeting last five minutes.

If any questions remain unanswered, if they wanted to have my guidance, I was there and then we did that quickly. And that was the beginning of the day. So, this was always followed by a joint coffee because having that kind of debate is also very useful.

By the way, I was always trying to have coffee also with my administrative, supportive staff because in the Commission, if one thing is problematic, it's the hierarchy. And for me what was always important was you need to value the people, not the positions they hold. And then the day was normally devoted to meeting with the Directors-General, colleagues, stakeholders, maybe traveling, if necessary, press, media.

One thing is clear: one needs to take a lot of decisions rather quickly, and for that you need to be well prepared. So, I was always reading. That's why I gave my colleagues always a limit. "Please, not more than 20 pages, for whatever you want to tell me, for whatever you want to prepare me - max 20 pages".

And evenings were always spent preparing for the next day. Twice a week sport, of course, also in the evening. No dinners. Many Commissioners were attending the dinners. I avoided them for whatever price because, first, it's not healthy. Second, evenings are to prepare for the next day.

I think the Commissioners, we are not typical politicians. And there isn't so much need for lobbying or connecting with the different governments, different people that you normally would in a real political life. I dare to say that if one is in a different political role, it's more difficult. This was my typical day.

As an anecdote, I was accused of being a technocrat. Frankly, the difference between a typical politician and a technocrat, for me is that the technocrats are reading and preparing more than the typical politicians and end up making their decisions based more on science and knowledge. Simply because we believe that's the right way in which one should function. Which doesn't mean that you don't have a political sense or feeling, but I think it's really important that you don't think that being in a political life for long gives you automatically all the knowledge you need for the next day and for the next meeting, and that you should not be unprepared.

But coming prepared means you have to work a lot. And that's how, how my days are looking. So, one thing which needs to be very clear. Politician is there to defend the public interest. They are paid by public money. And what I have learned also sometimes that the life-term politicians, when being a politician becomes a job, is not entirely linked to the... I don't want to sound wrongly. There are some who are excellent and who are really wholeheartedly devoted to that, but sometimes, if this is a job, you have to understand they have to take care of their families. They have their own private life for which they have to take care like anybody else who is employed in their own area, which means that they are pretty much guided also by private interest. And that's sometimes a bit in a collision with defending the longer-term stability, public interest, which needs to be there in place if you are holding a public office.

We touched a bit on the question before about the people, the colleagues. I think this is so, so important and it's really decisive. So I was always trying to build around me the team, which was not too much competitive so that they were not too much, all too good of, of one thing, but rather people from different interests, from different areas, different, of course different gender, everything, so that you get this kind of good mix of everything, which then actually delivers.

And you should never be afraid of setting around yourself the best you can get. Because if you don't go that way, it's actually just shooting in your own knee. Because, at the end of the day, you don't need somebody who tells you that you are right. You need people who tell you "This could be improved". And think it over. And you need a team with whom you can debate the questions through, which actually sharpens your arguments, sharpens your mind. And, without that, you are pretty much weakening yourself. On the one hand it's the cabinet, then you have DGs, then you have other things. But I think it's pretty clear that all that is part of the job.

[00:27:38] **Jana:** We were at the European Commission at the same time when you started. We both moved to Brussels. But one thing that strikes me is you said you wanted to have max 20-page briefs.

Well, in my most senior policy roles I served politicians instead who wanted a one-pager. You talking about the preparation and the army of people servicing you resonates. It really doesn't work like that on a daily basis.

You understand well the politics of policymaking, different communities, different approaches, different types of decisions, and some are incredibly complex and responsible, obviously also different coalitions and power plays. Can you offer any top tips or advice to academics who are willing and also eager to engage with the policy world on how to reach and influence audiences beyond academia? Where to start?

[00:28:34] **Janez:** Yes. Being excellent, I mean, creating and understanding science is no guarantee that you will be able to share your work in the best and most understandable and useful way. This requires special skills. And to be frank, it's hard to learn it.

Some have it, some do not. Saying doesn't mean that you cannot do better. But it is, at least from my experience, pretty much connected to whether you have that or you don't. You can build on that.

One piece of advice would be: Being correct about the second or the third figure after the decimal point may be scientifically correct, but sometimes this is too late, so it's not useful. If you want to be useful for policymaking, it's sometimes better to know that you can be assured that the things which you are doing are right, but don't insist on being able to hundred percent clarify something. This is important for publishing, and there you need to defend your scientific rigour. But when it comes to public advice, time is really important...

For example, we now need science-based targets that go beyond the climate change targets. It's so difficult to get scientists to agree on what these should be. And if you don't put it (the proposal) on the table, somebody else will because there is the need. And this will be, I don't know, people in advisory jobs, and it will not be peer reviewed, but it'll stay.

These things will then lead the future decision making. The scientists will, instead, need to actively contribute to solutions. They will need to work with and confront those at the table now, discussing and trying to explain what is wrong with those things.

I think it's really important to understand that time matters and messages need to be correct, need to be short, need to be sharp, need to be understandable to stay with policymakers, to stay with the public. How I learn, whenever I'm on stage, I always follow the audience's reaction. After my lecture, I always go to check the reactions on Twitter, on LinkedIn, to learn what resonated and what was not understood. It's always a two-way process in which we need to work. While scientists sometimes resist going deeper into policy advice, that's a personal choice, but it's simply less useful.

On the other hand, it has to be well-balanced, and one should not be too prescriptive and go too far. One needs to have a good understanding of what is useful and what is not. I have also learned that some things could be done by scientists, and for others you have to go then to consultancy, which dares to push things further faster. Then you go back to science and combine inputs for the best outcome.

These are the main lessons I would like to share. I think if one wants to be active, one needs to understand that the needs of the policy world are different from the needs of the publishing and academic worlds. But that doesn't mean that one should make compromises in their academic work.

[00:32:35] **Jana:** That was precious. Janez, thanks ever so much and there were so many takeaways that I think my colleagues will benefit from. Again, thank you for taking the time out of your incredibly busy schedule. We really appreciate it.

[00:32:52] **Janez:** Appreciate it. Take care Jana, and all the best.

[00:32:57] **Jana:** You've been listening to the Business of Policymaking podcast from Leeds University Business School. Presented by Jana Javornik and produced by Hannah Preston. If you'd like to get in touch about anything you've heard in this episode, our contact details are in the episode show notes.

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