Policy on Purpose

Episode 7: Professor Donald F. Kettl

ANGELA EVANS: Hello, my name is Angela Evans and I am the dean of the LBJ School, and I am really pleased that we're back with another podcast, and this time I am especially pleased because it's an old buddy, friend and a wonderful colleague of mine: Dr. Don Kettl, who has joined the LBJ School. I am so, so pleased to have you here. It's like a dream come true, in a lot of ways.

DONALD KETTL: For me as well. I'm just thrilled to be able to not only work with you, but with the entire team here at the LBJ School. It's just an outstanding group of faculty, working on cutting-edge issues, so there is nothing I could wish for that would be better than that.

EVANS: Well thank you, Don. And on behalf of the school as well, so we're really pleased. And the reason why we're so excited is, right now the school is thinking about its 50th anniversary in two years. And we think about an anniversary — it's a celebration, but it's also a retrospective — like what have we done, what have we accomplished and what's really coming up in the future. So this is a very big year for us. And as we've talked as colleagues over the years, [about] how do you take knowledge that is created in the university, created around in the private sector and move it, so that public policy makers, whether they are people in the state, local or federal government, actually can use that information, and use that data and use that experience — how do we do that, and what's the purpose of our public policy schools, what role do they play? So we're at a very pivotal point in our history. That's why I'm so excited you're at the school, to help us think this thing through. So what I would like you to do is just [take] a little bit to talk to our listeners about where you see public policy schools in terms of their future role in policy development and policy leadership.

KETTL: Because one of the things that I find fascinating now is that what really makes public policy distinctive is that it is in fact — as you just mentioned, it is engaged with real world problems. It's not simply just an effort to develop abstract principles or bits of knowledge that are really useful between pages of books. It's useful only in the way in which it could improve the lives of citizens. And that's one of the things that really makes public policy distinctive. And one of the things that I find fascinating in talking to lots and lots and lots of practitioners, the people out there making policy, trying to deliver policy, trying to work with citizens, is that we're at a point now where some of these problems have never been more important, where mistakes that we make could ripple through society almost instantaneously and where people who are out there trying to solve these problems are just starved for intellectual capital, where people can help them think through these issues, find new solutions — but especially find a new generation of leaders who can come in and try to work with them. To try to help attack these things. So the paradox probably is that the more complex these problems have gotten, the harder it is for them to solve; the more wicked the problems are, the better our position is in trying to help them do this and the

more we, and our students, are needed. And so that is what makes this such an important, such a special time. And what creates an opportunity for real insights in how to do this better.

EVANS: Yes, I think that one of our challenges, we talked about this earlier, is that we're preparing students and we have to prepare them for the future, in somethings that we aren't even aware would happen. So it's almost the unknown, how do we prepare students to have that basic skill set, that basic intellectual approach, that basic curiosity, that basic idea of how to reveal problems, and how to then take those problems that are complex and parse them in a way that you don't lose the richness of that problem. But at the same time, you make it more of a problem that you can attack. So we talked a little bit about that, and talk to the listeners about some of your ideas of how we try to move in that direction.

KETTL: OK, good. Too often what worries me is that we end up trying to drive down the highway at 80 miles an hour, but steering by looking in the rearview mirror, and we can't very well negotiate these curves if we're just looking backward.

We've got to ground what it is that we know, and in fact even the problems we try to solve by making sure that we understand what's happening, but more importantly, probably, making sure that we create students and a body of knowledge that is capable of trying to attack issues that either are unpredictable in some ways, or may not even exist. I think in many ways our biggest problem, our biggest challenge, is the fact that probably at least half of our students five to 10 years from now are going to be working on problems that haven't even been invented yet. So how do we try to make sure we can do for society what it is that our students are going to be able to do for all the rest of us. So how to do that? I mean, part of it is to expose students to cutting-edge problems, to essentially throw them into the swimming pool but teach them how to swim along the way. Getting them confident so they can in fact swim and make it to the other side. Give them the kind of experience where they say, "You know, I haven't quite seen this before but I have confidence that I can handle it. I know how to work with people and learn quickly to be able to catch up with problems." We can teach them in some ways, "Oh no, I've seen this before, maybe not quite as formative, something that in fact I recognize."

There is a body of knowledge that some problems have been around for 2,000 years or so, and if they keep coming back the odds are they are going to keep reoccurring over and over again, and there is some bits of theory on top of that, that also provided a kind of framework for helping students understand what really is new, and what isn't, and what it is that we can learn from the past and how to adapt to those new things and that provides a kind of framework that allows students to attack these problems. To solve them. To understand what's new, what isn't. What they can contribute, where they need help, and with that kind of experience in the long run, it really makes the kind of things better for everybody because really makes public policy distinctive is not only trying to work with these issues that ripple across society but to do it in a way that recognizes that it's the public interest that is at the core of all of this.

It's not just a mechanistic effort. It's not just a way to maximize utility in different kinds of models, but it's to try to solve the things in a way, that will allow us, allow our students to do so, in a way that really serves the public more broadly. And that's what makes the public in public policy so important.

EVANS: And we were talking about some of the challenges, there because people — the perception is that we become much more divided. That we don't want to listen to people who have a difference of opinion than we do, or that people have opinion that is not based on fact. So one of the challenges we

face is one of the things that are absolutely critical to providing a really solid background to the students who leave here, is to understand that that is not what they are. We don't care about their opinions — what we want to do is make sure they understand how they formulate really sound information around something that they are tackling and that they understand all sides to this. So it seems that one of the big challenges that they have is that sometimes our students come in and with a certain set of learning and a certain set of biases, and perceptions and we have to break those down before we build up some of these other things. So I see this as a little different time in our history, at least in this generation that is coming in without a background or having experiences where educative kinds of experiences were more important than evocative kinds of experiences. So can you talk a little bit about how we're going to try to meet those challenges here?

KETTL: Sure. That's so important because there was a time, maybe not so long ago, where the idea is, you come in and we will give you the 10 rules, the five principles, the three tools — then you can then take out with you in the job, and that would give you what you need. But given the fact that so many problems now are so wicked and they are so unpredictable and that the issues and the problems and the solutions are so interconnected, the real challenge is that it's very hard to say, "Here are the 10 rules to follow — and open up the textbook, it's on [page] 47, go from there." So the problem is that you can't do that. How do you get out of that? It turns out, on the other hand, given the fact that there is often so much conflict and so much concern about fake news, so much concern about the visions in society, a way to try to get out of this and a way to help students is — OK, let's step back. What is the problem that we need to solve? Is there anybody here in the room opposed to having safe drinking water when you turn on the tap in the morning? Is there anybody that wants to make sure that the air traffic control system does not work? Anybody who is going over the age of 65 and going to the hospital and is not going to get high-quality health care and is not going to have your bills paid? Anybody opposed to any of those kinds of problems?

Well, if you start with problems that we all recognize, problems that we agree have to be solved, one of the ways to try to break down the political barriers and to develop strategies that work is to understand the problems and then to build coalitions to try to solve them. And then bring in the tools. The understandings that in fact do that again, with the frame that focuses on the public interest and all that. So [what] really makes this style of education distinctive is making it problem-based, problem-centered, solution-driven. But doing it in a way that says, we can provide a broader framework so that every time a student encounters one of those problems, it's not from scratch for the very first time. So we just don't have time to wait for people to learn from scratch every time.

EVANS: Yes, yeah. The other thing that we've talked about, too, is: When you're working on a problem and you agree this is a problem, you can disagree on how you're going to solve the problem, but one thing that you know is very important for us in policy education, is to help our students understand, even if you disagree on 99 percent of what you stand for, or what you're trying to do — if you can find that 1 percent where you can work together, that 1 percent then opens the door to others, because it helps you work together, understand each other, understand the pressures that are on people who have a different perspective than you do — um, that's really important. So there are two things. One is that.

And the other thing is getting out of the building, getting out of the educational cocoon, and going out into the community and talking to people, and meeting people and understanding people that you think you're trying to help. And that's another thing we're talking about in terms of a different direction for us: focusing more on those slivers where we can form coalitions and help those broaden out once you work

together, and the other is really getting out on the street. And where the rubber hits the road, and finding people that are walking in their shoes. So talk a little bit about that in terms of how we discuss that.

KETTL: And both of those things are important. The first is, if it's problem-driven, then it's a way to try to say OK, we can build a consensus that there are things that are important that we need to get done. So how do we do that? And it turns out that there is an underlying paradox of leadership here, which is that individual leaders have never been more important, the more complex the problems become. And the way to try to get at that, to learn how to do that is to go out and talk with the people who are involved in trying to do this. And that means being able to discuss issues with people and understand how to find common ground — it's developing trust in each other's relationships, but just as importantly as going out and actually touching the problems that you are trying to solve, be able to connect with the people who you're trying to serve. It's one thing to talk about the problem of homelessness from 50,000 feet and just looking down and saying, "Well, here is what I think ought to be done. Because here is what my models say," as opposed to "Here it is about what is really going on with the people who are on the streets, here are the issues that they have to try to solve" by talking to them, understanding their problems, understanding what it is that they want, what it is that is going to help them. Then you're most in a position to be able to develop solutions that are most likely to work. And given the fact that you have problems that you want to try to solve and you've got issues that you in fact, you want to try to build a coalition of support, the more that you can understand how what you design is going to affect the people who deserve and need the help that you're trying to provide, then you're going to be much more effective.

If you look at the opioid crisis, for example. Everybody's talking about, "We need to do something about this," and people are throwing solutions around all over the place. To what degree have we gone out and really connected with the people who are struggling with the problems of opioid abuse? Figuring out why it is that it happens and why it happens more in some places than in others. We have the opportunity here with a problem that we all agree has to be solved, that we want to try to solve, to be able to solve it better if we could devise systems that connect better with the people who are struggling to try to escape the curse of opioid addiction. So one of the things that we can do, I think, is to help frame the problems, provide students with a chance to how to think about it, a framework about the public interest just to drive them, but then get them out of the building, talk to the people who are doing it, talk to the people who are trying to solve it. Talk to the people who are partners and talk to the people who ultimately are the ones who we mostly deserve, and find a way to connect a network that in fact links it all. And by doing that, that in the end is what is going to be most effective. And that's part of the paradox of individual leadership — the more complex these problems are, the more important it is to train students with the skills of leadership that can connect all the pieces together.

EVANS: Yeah, that's really — I think that's critical. And the other thing that I think is critical about what you said is that when you — you have to understand the complexity, but we have to also help our students once they understand that to make it simple. Not "simple" in a sense of a simple solution, but make it understandable and make it doable. Because sometimes things can appear so complex that people throw up their hands [and say], "Oh my gosh, this involves everybody — there is no way I can do this, I'm just a nonprofit who sits here and does this." And I think that's another important thing that we need to be doing as educators, is having our students be comfortable with complexity. And actually thrive in complexity and go to it, and say, "This is complex, I want in." And understanding how that can overwhelm you, but how it can inform you, and I think that's how our public policy education needs to evolve. To make sure that we have a lot of those kinds of experiences for our students. So that's — I

totally agree with you. Don, if we were to talk about what you think — you really worry about in terms of our policy education: What do you worry about in terms of our — that we might fail at? That we have an opportunity that we're not taking? That we're too lazy. What are some of the things that worry you?

KETTL: And there is stuff that worries me. This is all in the context of the fact that I'm really excited about the opportunities because I think we can be smart enough to solve some problems. But the problems are first it's really easy to look to the future, on the one hand, by trying to worry about only steering to the past. And if we don't find a way to keep ourselves on the cutting edge we can be really good at solving last year's problems and miss the ability to get on top of this one. There are some things that I think in terms of skills that students need to learn more of, that we need to figure out how to do better. One of them is good people management. One of the paradoxes is that as we mentioned, the more complex the problems get, the more important individual leaders are. We don't spend nearly enough time trying to get the right people with the right skills and the right jobs. I've talked to a friend of mine that used to run a major private company, and he said that if you aren't spending at least 50 percent of your time managing people, figuring out how to get your people motivated to do the job, you're going to fail in the private sector. This is a lesson we ought to learn from the private sector. And so that's one thing the government ought to do better. And then you were talking about this process of trying to understand complexity, and I think that there are ways that we can find out of complexity a way to try to boil stories down, boil data down in a way to make clear, simple, convincing strategies for enlisting people in the cause to get the problem solved. And too often we find [that] as we have data that is more complex we have data analysis that is equally complex. And sometimes impenetrable from the people on the outside. The reality is that the people in the policy world, and especially policy makers, live off stories.

EVANS: Narratives. Yes.

KETTL: Live off narratives, and the question is, "What's the story here? Why should I solve a problem, how can I solve it? What's the story?" It doesn't mean being sloppy. Or loose.

EVANS: Yes.

KETTL: Or in some ways inexact. But it means in some ways being more careful, more precise and more able to be able to take the core problems and ideas and be able to boil them down in a way that is even more persuasive, because the more noisy the environment is, and the more information there is, the more people are saying, "What's going on here?" And, "What insight can I have that will give me the way to be able to cut through all of what's going on, so that I can get something so that in fact will help me drive toward a solution." And so there is a way to try to take complex data and to reduce it to stories that are persuasive, being able to understand what's hiding underneath, to be able to unpack, to be able to understand the real meaning of things, and it's being able to lead by creating a vision for people about the direction we need to go and why. And so, there are things that —

EVANS: Small charge, right?

KETTL: Small charge, but it's one of the things that when I'm struck by, is that there are people who do it. And people who do it well. And the people who do it well are the leaders who make a difference. And I'm convinced that our students can learn how to do that. And there are things that we can do, but it involves not lecturing them but giving them experience, exposing them to a wide range of things, teaching them how to absorb some bruises and bumps along the way so they can be resilient and bounce back. But with

all that can kind of bring a kind of crystal-clear vision about where it is that they want to go. Because one of the things that I'm struck by with this generation of students in particular is that they want to make a difference.

EVANS: Yes.

KETTL: So one of the things that we can do is help them to try to figure out exactly how that works.

EVANS: Yeah, the raw material and the passion is there. It's how we give them the tools and the other thing is how we put them in front of people who have been exemplars of this type of leadership. And oftentimes they are behind the scenes. They are not the people that are in the spotlight, that are on the news, that have microphones pushed in their faces. Those are people who — they saw a situation, they got called on and their leadership just blossomed. And they were able to take care of things. And those are things too, I think, when we're talking about public policy education, is exposing students to those kinds of people. Not that they say, "We want you to be exactly like him or her, but look what that person did, in a particular situation. They were ready and they stepped in." So those are other things that I would like us to you know do more in our policy education — bringing people in to talk about their experiences and how our students can learn from what they learned — their mistakes, things that they were successful on, how they parsed a problem. This could be a very important part of our program of how we bring the right kind of people in at the right time with the right problems.

KETTL: Right. And the advantage here is that it tells students, "Wait a minute. I want to make a difference but I don't have to be elected to the highest office in the land to be able to do that."

EVANS: Yes.

KETTL: There are amazing people out there doing amazing things. It's possible to do amazing things, so you don't need to be cynical. I can be like those amazing people because I can imagine myself sitting in that chair doing that. For me to be able to do that, I can learn from them about what it is that those people did well —

EVANS: Yes.

KETTL: — and what people, maybe, not so much did well.

EVANS: Yes.

KETTL: And it's — I can learn how to try to prepare myself to be able to assume that kind of job because I know it's important and doable. I like to imagine myself doing it. And one of the things that we can very usefully do is connect students with people who have already figured out how to do that. At least, most of the time.

EVANS: Mm-hm.

KETTL: And so our students can learn how to do it faster, how they can do it better. They can do it with fewer mistakes. Because one of the things that is the reality of a world that's moving so fast is that it's not very patient with the government that doesn't keep up. And so we can help our students learn how to

lace on the track shoes and be able to keep up with the world that they're trying to help.

EVANS: Yes. And I think you mentioned something that's really important, and that's failure. You know, people — that seems like a bad word. You know, like, "Oh, it's terrible. You failed." But it isn't. A failure is — it's an action. It's a result of an action. So we have to help our students understand that they will fail. That there will be failures. But how do you learn from those? And if you don't try, you're not going to fail. It's like, you know, that's why erasers are on pencils. I'm dating myself, but you know, if you're writing, you have an eraser because you've actually taken the step to write. So that's the other thing; it's making them comfortable. Because so much is expected of the students that come that they have to be all knowledgeable, perfect. They have to have the right solution. They know everything. And it's like, no, you don't, No. 1. No. 2, take a chill pill — be a little bit humble. And No. 3, we're going to put you in situations where you don't succeed so that you know you can survive and learn from that. That's a really important part of providing a policy education for our students.

KETTL: And there are some really interesting things that can be done, not only to figure out how to learn, which is based on the premise that you have to learn because you don't know it all. None of us do. None of us get it right all the time. We all make mistakes. It's not avoiding the mistakes, but it's anticipating what mistakes you most need to try to avoid.

So that's one thing we can do. What, what kinds of things have we drifted into in the past that we said, "You know, if we had thought about that a little bit more, we could have avoided the risk of exposing kids in Flint, Michigan to lead in the drinking water."

EVANS: Exactly.

KETTL: We could have thought about that. We could have understood how to kind of avoid that kind of a problem. So there's a part of that we can teach our students about. There's when problems come up, how can we try to bounce back more quickly? So it's: Which problems are the most important ones to avoid? When problems come up, how can we try to learn most quickly? How can we try to make sure we don't repeat them? And how can we speed up the process of keeping up with a fast-changing future? I'm — and this is where exposing ourselves to people and our students to — people struggle with these issues.

EVANS: Yeah.

KETTL: There's a fascinating story about the Coast Guard that evolved from the problem of the Exxon Valdez, which was in Alaska — an enormous oil spill which showed just how unprepared the Coast Guard was for the challenges and the problems of a major crisis that in the end, because of what amounted to a failure there, lead to an enormous success as the Coast Guard lead the effort to try to help New Orleans recover from Hurricane Katrina.

EVANS: Yes.

KETTL: So it turns out that not only can you do your best to try to avoid problems, but if you're really smart, you can figure out how to learn so that when the next problem comes, you're even better prepared and can help people learn even more quickly.

EVANS: Right, and you get down to the fundamentals, right? You don't get caught up in the details. You think about what were the ess— what was the essence of this problem, what were the essence of the processes, essence of communication among those that were involved and then take that and transfer that. So every experience doesn't have to be a brand-new experience.

You start having that sort of muscle memory of making mistakes and how that worked so that when it's time, you have enough, you have enough strength and convictions in your own knowledge and expertise to be able to step up and try. You know, just step up and get in there. That's really where it's really important that our students feel that way.

KETTL: And one of the things that's fascinating is that there are new problems that pop up all the time but if you stop and think carefully, many problems that seem new at least have hints and reflections—

EVANS: Vestiges in the past, yes.

KETTL: —of things before. And what that tells us is, if a problem's been going on for a long time, I can understand that. I understand why it's a problem, what's worked in the past, what hasn't. Gives me some instinct so I'm not starting from scratch.

EVANS: Exactly.

KETTL: There's some bits of theory that tell us about what kind of strategies and approaches are more likely to work and which ones won't. That tells us what it is that we need to know. It tells us if we're going to try to reorganize an agency, work in the federal government, you probably ought to look at which congressional committees have jurisdictions because you can plot the battle lines that will be joined. Why? Because we've seen that in the past.

EVANS: And you better understand that reorganization isn't always the first choice. Right?

KETTL: And so you know that sometimes when we're reorganized, it hasn't always worked.

EVANS: Yes.

KETTL: So, by understanding history, by understanding theory, it helps provide a structure for walking into new things that you've never seen before and not starting from scratch. But then by learning what it is that works, it gives you way — for those of us who are scholars — to improve on theory, to improve on history, to improve on our education, and to make the next set of problems we have to try to face and deal with problems that we can solve that much more quickly.

EVANS: Well, this is like — this is why I'm so excited. Everybody's listening to this podcast. I mean, having this dialogue with such substance and passion and drive and commitment really makes me feel really great about where public policy schools are going in the future and how our school can help continue this dialogue. And I'm so pleased, Don, that you're going to be joining us and be one of us to help lead us through this really important time. Very important time in our history as public policy schools.

Thank you so much for joining me today.

KETTL: Well, I am thrilled with this. And I will tell you, one can look at all the battles over fake news, and what could we possibly know about anything? And look at the battles and concerns that we're tearing ourselves apart on important issues. All which are real and important problems. But at the bottom of all this, what I'm really excited about is that there are big problems that we know we need to solve and I see people every day who are doing a pretty good job—

EVANS: *(Laughing)* Yeah.

KETTL: —solving them. We've got students who want to be able to step into their shoes and be able to do it, and I have confidence that we can help them do it better. And if we do, we'll all be better off. And there's probably no more noble mission than those of us in higher education than public policy could want, which is why I'm so thrilled to have a chance to join everybody here at the LBJ School to take part in that.

EVANS: Well, thank you so much *(inaudible)*, we really appreciate it. And thank you for tuning in.

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