Taking counsel

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Abstract

Taking counsel in public planning opens up opportunities for stakeholder participation, verification of reasoning, and debate.

1   Introduction

Planning styles of those 'in the know' — i.e. aware of something known only to few people — are characteristically esoteric. Such mysticism often leads to very little information revealed to stakeholders such as those who are meant to carry out the action. Esoteric planning is typical in the military, where strategies must by no means escape from the confines of the planning team, as well as in political regimes such as monarchies, oligarchies, and dictatorships.

Wider and more open planning platforms such as democratic governments, where ideas are meant to be shared at any stage of their development, render esoteric planning unsuitable or inappropriate — in fact, it could easily turn any democratic regime into a monarchy or oligarchy. The democratic alternative to esoteric planning is *explicit* planning (Perdicoúlis, 2010), where all reasoning is openly and clearly shared, checked and debated.

Even within explicit planning, though, there are still different ways to plan ('*modes d'emploi*'), catering to personal taste or cultural traditions. For instance, people may feel that objectives must be defined first, before any action is conceived (Perdicoúlis, 2011b, pp.85–86); others, in contrast, may wish to define their action first (Perdicoúlis, 2011b, pp.116–117), although it must appear justified and in unison with the current situation — Figure 1.
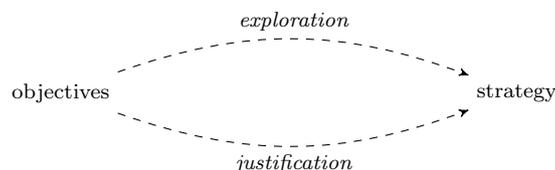

FIGURE 1   Two alternative pathways from objectives to strategy: justify or explore?

2 Explicit reasoning

Planning operations of high risk (typical to the tentative nature of strategy — as opposed to operational arrangements (Perdicoúlis, 2011b, p.9)) or high profile (where the leader's image is at stake) are often communicated merely as action — for instance, 'we are going to do this'. In such contexts, there is rarely any need to provoke emotions or instability: the troops must simply march on; the subjects must obey; hence, a certain dose of esotericism or mysticism is purposely employed.

Nonetheless, a few executive bodies may find themselves in a sensitive position — such as academics, for instance, who must think and must know the exact logic of the plan before proceeding. This may provide an invitation for explicit reasoning. And the first query to be conducted is likely to be extending the action in two directions: upstream towards the *motives* — to the left, or backwards in Figure 2 — and downstream towards the *consequences* — to the right, or forwards in Figure 2.
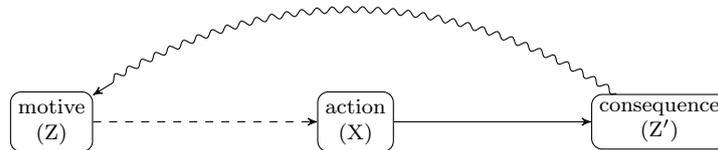

FIGURE 2   Explicit reasoning

In addition to the above, it is also expected of the planning operation that the consequences (or, in a more positive tone, 'outcomes' Z') correspond to and satisfy the motives (or, in a more definitive mode, 'objectives' Z) — represented with the 'snake' backwards-pointing arrow in Figure 2. After all, planning is not *only* about the action: certain outcomes must be achieved, while others must be averted (Perdicoúlis, 2012).

3 Practice example

In order to survive the financial hardship associated with recent cuts in the funding of teaching, a number of 'teaching universities' are willing to become 'research universities' in a massive transformation over a short time. Perhaps the grass is greener on the other side, once again. Let us accompany a particular case of undisclosed identity, imagining the institutional administration 'taking counsel' (i.e. discussing the problem) as opposed to 'keeping their own counsel' (i.e. saying nothing about what they think or plan).

3.1 The order

Let us consider the following institutional order issued by the administration:

> 'All researchers, whether currently anchored to research centres or unbound, must join the research centres of the home institution by the end of next month'.

FIGURE 3   The order

At the moment of the issue, the affected researchers were not informed about the motives (or reasons) of the order, and had no idea about the consequences for their own (or the institutional) research. This should be enough to instigate research about the order itself.

3.2   Elucidating the motives

Being researchers, the interested parties soon discovered the motives behind this order — or at least they thought they did as in the argument stated (as an assumption) in Figure 4.
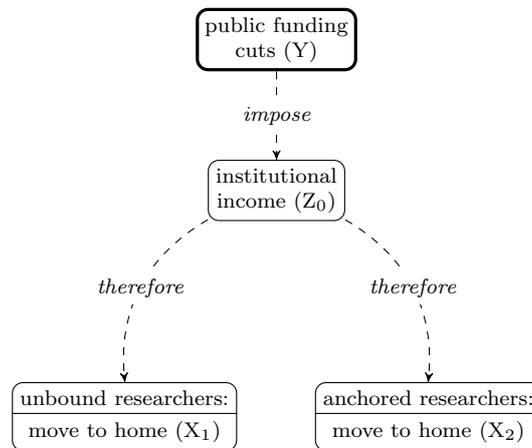

FIGURE 4   The (assumed) motive behind the order

So far, the motive and the reasoning appear plausible. But are X_1 and X_2 the only solutions? Couldn't there be another solution? (Figure 5)
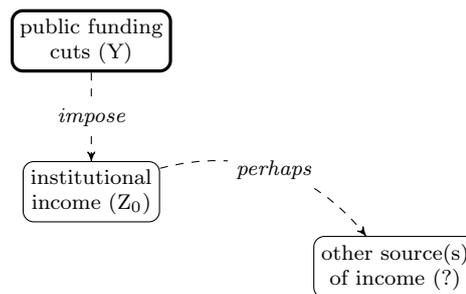

FIGURE 5   Other options are left unexplored — at least from public consideration

3.3   Is it going to work?

The order is expected (by all) to produce 'good' results. To find out exactly what may come out of the issued order, a qualitative simulation (Perdicoúlis, 2011a) must be carried out — Figure 6.

Several points become clear in the qualitative simulation of Figure 6 — for instance: (a) the home institution will have many more researchers, which (b) will permit the institutional candidature for research funding; however, (c) new teams will have to be formed, (d) which will decrease the
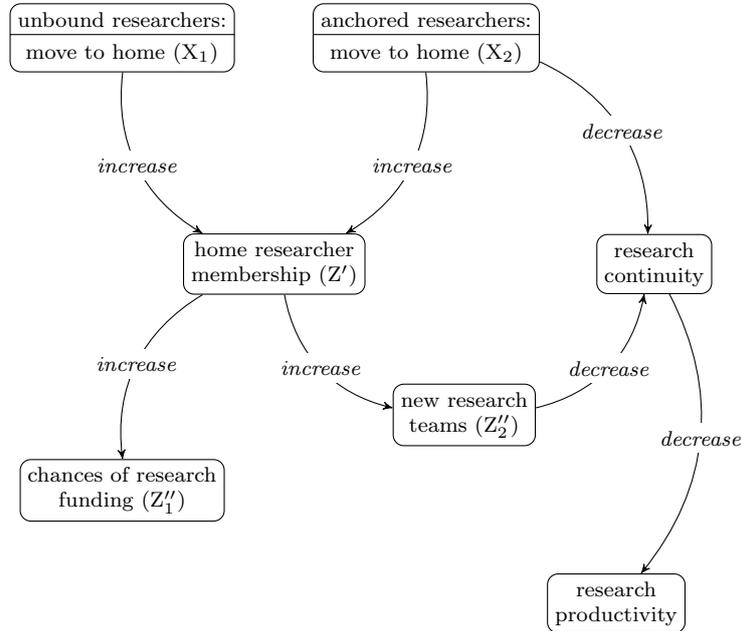
FIGURE 6   Some practical consequences of the order — not considering financial impacts yet

research continuity of the currently anchored researchers, and (e) this will result in a decrease in research productivity of the currently anchored researchers.

So far, we have one positive outcome, '(b)', and one negative: '(e)'. Also, we still need to check what happens to the pathways of money: is the main objective likely to be satisfied?

3.4   Last check

The esoteric 'plan', reduced to an institutional order, is allegedly placing a bet: to raise money through research funding. Figure 7 highlights the final effects of the administration's bet ('chances of research funding'), and its apparent incapacity to boost the institutional income in the long run.
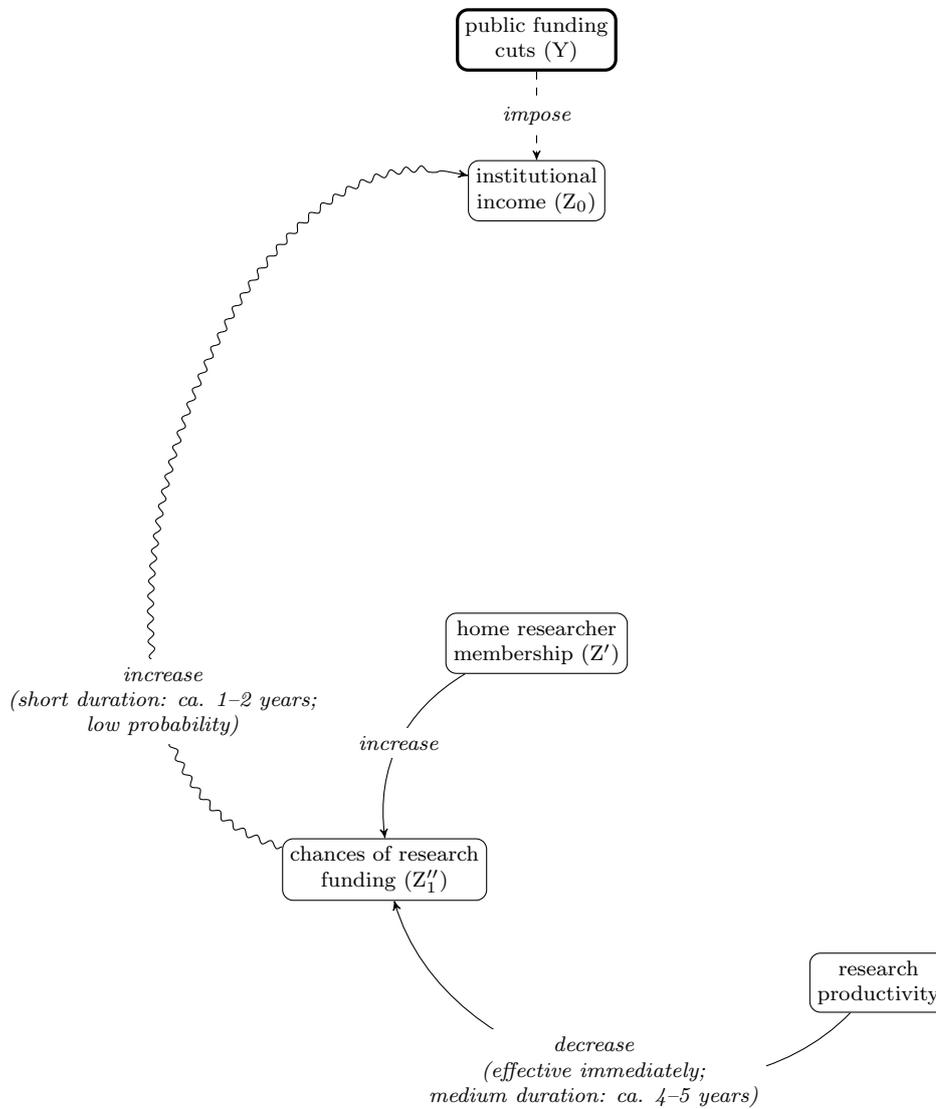
FIGURE 7   The final word is about money — the final effects of the administration's bet

3.5   The full picture

So far we have seen the alleged planning argument and its exploration develop by parts: first in the direction of the motives (§ 3.2), then in the direction of the practical effects (§ 3.3), and finally the financial aspect (§ 3.4) which is assumed to be the major concern. This has been convenient for the understanding of the parts, but it would not be systems thinking if we were not to see the whole picture — no matter how big that had to be (Figure 8).
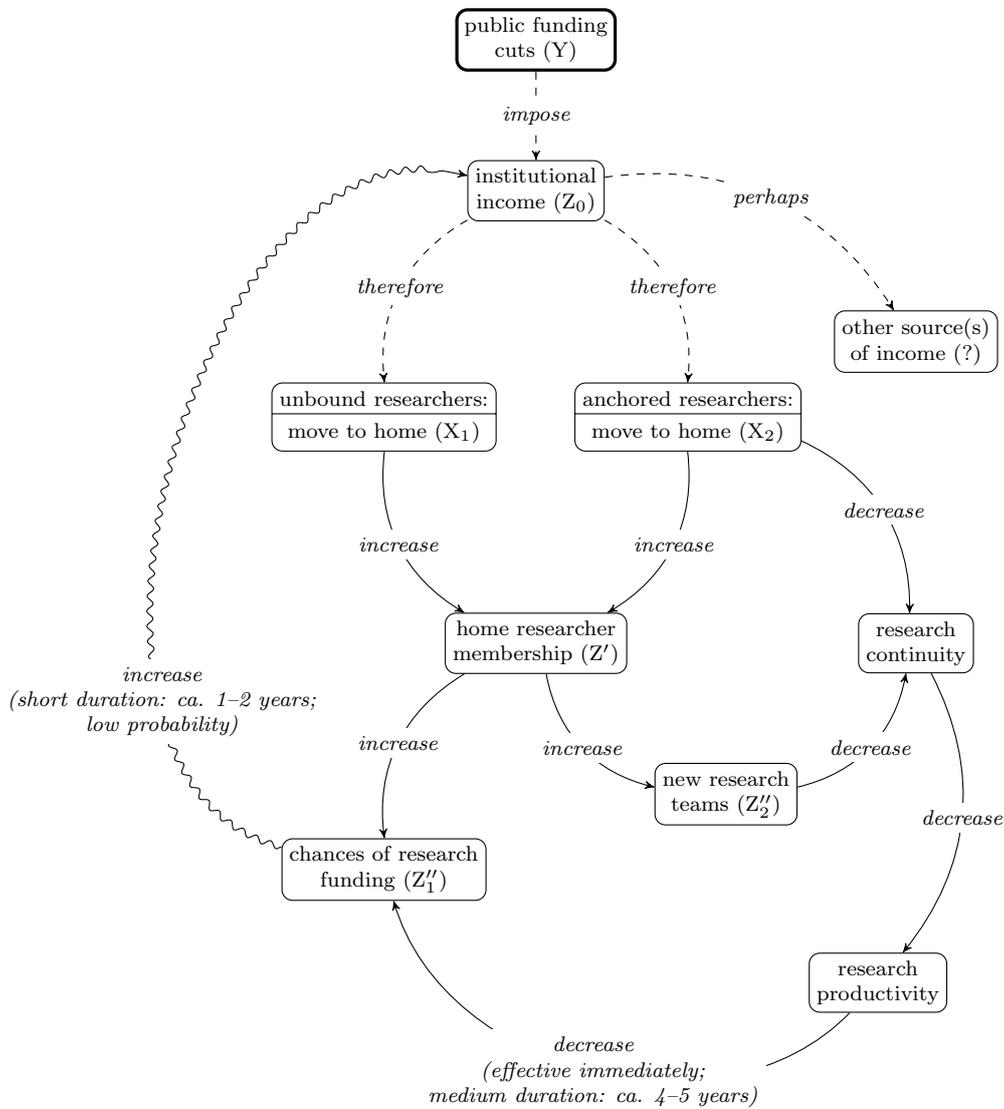
FIGURE 8   The full picture reveals a feeble argument for raising institutional income through major changes in research structures

4   Discussion

A massive change such as the one called for by an institutional order (§ 3.1) is as disruptive as in any other culture — for instance, removing all the trees of an orchard to replace them with another type: it needs time until production resumes (subject to risks), and it is not sure that the subsidies will be given (after all, it is a *candidature* to subsidies), or whether the subsidies will be generous enough to guarantee subsistence until full production resumes.

5   Conclusion

It is definitely more peaceful for an administration — including those with a public mission and aspirations to democracy — to *keep one's own counsel* rather than exposing and defending their plans, intents, and reasoning. On the contrary, though, *taking counsel* opens up the line of reasoning to verification through the contribution of various stakeholders, thus turning the planning operation safer and more successful. This probably justifies the extra bother.

References

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