The End of Predictable Policymaking: Lessons for Public Affairs Professionals

We are now in the age of high-velocity policymaking, where high-impact policy decisions are increasingly being made with compressed consultation cycles and limited visibility into second-order effects.

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Within weeks of President Trump's 2025 inauguration, the US announced steep tariffs on a number of countries that are its trading partners, including India and China. What followed was highly unusual as duties were modified, challenged, negotiated and recalibrated, increased and reduced in rapid succession, leaving companies to manage their supply chains with limited visibility and a constantly moving target in policy direction.

Nine years earlier, India's demonetization drive similarly arrived as a sudden and unexpected announcement. While it was legally upheld and hotly debated afterwards, it remains a textbook example of a policy shock and is remembered by businesses and ordinary people for the speed and scale of rapid adjustments it required.

Cut to present, the US-Iran conflict has visibly contributed to oil price volatility and disrupted supply chains in many countries around the world. Within India, the ongoing controversy around the rollout of E20 petrol has shown that even a policy with clear national-interest objectives can generate consumer anxiety if concerns around vehicle compatibility risks and reduced mileage are not sufficiently addressed.

These are just a few examples demonstrating the increasingly visible phenomenon of *high-velocity policymaking*. Until recently, businesses could broadly assume that major policy decisions would move through predictable stages of consultation papers, draft regulations, stakeholder discussions and feedback, transition period, and final implementation. That framework has not fully disappeared, but it is increasingly being disrupted by policy decisions where direction, regulatory requirements or implementation timelines change faster than businesses and citizens can adapt.

Just to be clear, our argument is not that these quick and decisive policy actions are inherently flawed, or to say that governments should avoid such quick policymaking. On the contrary, policymaking delays in matters of energy transition, national security, environment, or even industrial competitiveness can often extract its own costs, as we in India are all too familiar.

Instead, we limit the discussion to helping public affairs and policy professionals understand this reality better and formulate necessary strategies to navigate policy volatility both efficiently and ethically.

The business impact of high-velocity policymaking is still being studied. JP Morgan Research for example has a live tracker for US tariffs updates and their continuing economic impact. A 2026 study further notes that businesses face both immediate tariff costs and strategic difficulty when future trade rules are unclear.

The important lesson here is for public affairs to evolve for an age when governments around the world are increasingly willing to make high-impact decisions quickly: from tariffs and energy transitions to monetary, digital, industrial and climate policies.

A PA professional's role today is no longer limited to advocacy *after* a policy proposal is visible. Instead, it must build additional capabilities across four broad dimensions: policy sensing, scenario planning, second-order impact assessment and stakeholder communication readiness.

For example, effective policy sensing necessitates building an early-warning system, which combined with impact assessment can help both policymakers and organisations understand policy consequences before they transform into full-blown crises.

To build such a system, PA leaders can ask the following questions:

- What policy shifts are plausible regardless of their probability and even if not yet formally announced?
- Which stakeholders will be affected beyond the obvious first-order impact? In what ways will they be impacted?
- What are the operational, consumer, legal, financial, reputational and political risks involved?
- What evidence can be credibly placed before policymakers, before a policy becomes a *fait accompli*?
- How should organisations communicate responsibly when unexpected policy shocks create uncertainty?

Equally important is building capacity for second-order impact assessment. As both the US-Iran conflict and India's E20 rollout have demonstrated, second-order effects inevitably show up in myriad forms: from supply-chain disruptions and oil-price volatility to consumer confusion or distrust, warranty, insurance or compliance ambiguities, litigation risks, or long-term reputation damage. PA professionals can add value here by surfacing these effects early and reliably.

The final lesson here is for Public Affairs leaders to develop a 'policy shock readiness' framework. Overlapping with the four capabilities described above, this framework can include policy-risk dashboards, scenario planning, technical evidence briefs, coalition building with credible external organisations or groups, stakeholder communications protocols, and rapid-response playbooks.

After all, regardless of how quickly a policy is made, its lasting success still depends on the four dimensions of legitimacy, trust, consultation and implementation, and public affairs professionals have a constructive role to play in all four.

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