Paul Kershaw Podcast Transcript

0:14 – 0:26 Land acknowledgment
We would like to acknowledge that the recording of this podcast takes place on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam People. We are grateful to the Musqueam for hosting us.

0:27 – 1:05 Dr. Kershaw is a tenured professor at the UBC SPPH, public speaker, regular media contributor, and founder of Generation Squeeze. Perhaps you can open this black box for us of trying to understand the process behind engaging and provoking these changes, you mention that it can take a long time to accomplish such impacts. Can you tell us a little more about the process the steps, and do you just wake up one day and start making cold calls to government. How does it work?

1:05 – 8:14 Engaging and provoking changes
There are some calls to be made there’s no doubt it’s about building relationships, but there are many steps before that and so maybe let me just walk us back a bit and let me provide some context. So at Generation Squeeze, which is a partnership of my lab at UBC and then the Vancity community foundation and a non-profit called the association for generational equity we have been existing for several years now and made a number of important changes in the world of politics. In partnership with the coalition of Childcare Advocates of BC we have helped to win an historic billion dollar investment in childcare. On the housing affordability front contributed to the first ever tax on empty homes, we’ve contributed to ensuring that there can’t be limitless rent increases in Ontario for buildings built before 2019. We have ensured we actually think about changing our zoning to add density to help price a younger demographic back in. We have done something provocative like encouraging governments to move towards taxing unhealthy home values more so we can reduce taxes on income for regular folks and especially renters. And most recently we’ve been trying to protect pricing pollution legislation in the courts of appeal in the provinces of Ontario and Saskatchewan where those governments where challenging the idea that it would be constitutional for federal government to price pollution and we know from the evidence that pricing pollution is absolutely critical these days to protect the health and wellbeing on Canadians generally but especially younger generations and future generations. So those are some of the accomplishments that the GenSqueeze research and knowledge mobilization lab on campus in partner with a range of collaborators off-campus have achieved.

And how do we do that? The black box. Well the first step is acknowledging that you have a problem. And that problem in the academy is that we often think if we produce the evidence, the evidence will be sufficient to change the minds of decision makers whether that’s at an organizational level or at a government level. And I proudly teach the Knowledge to Action class in the School of Population Health at the University of BC and one of the first things that we explore in that class is that evidence is rarely a determining factor in the decision that human beings make. It might be one important factor but if we think that evidence is going to be the primary factor that shapes human beings decisions both individually, organizationally and societally then we’re not understanding how human beings make
decisions. And there’s two kinds of cognition that are really important. One is the kind of reasoning that we so emphasize on campus and it’s so critical to our professional work. But as human beings we’ve evolved to have many kinds of cognition that relate to our intuitions and we need when we want to mobilize evidence to think about how we present the evidence such that the facts speak for themselves but they also try to tap into the hearts, the emotional side that captures our audience’s attention because human beings are hardwired to be engaged both intellectually and emotionally and we need to manage both of those optics.

So that’s one piece of it, don’t simply imagine that evidence can stand alone thinking about our knowledge exchange activities if we think we just put in years in doing this great research project and now the knowledge translation will happen because we write one good press release and do one good interview and somehow that will magically distribute all of our information to all the places it needs to go and their hearts and minds will be amazed with wonder about how we’ve never acted on this evidence before and suddenly and magically they change what they do forever we’re going to be very disappointed because that’s not how public policy will change.

Which brings me to my second observation. That politics responds to those who organize and show up. That is really one of the major morals of the Generation Squeeze story. And so it has made me reflect on some of the hubris that initially drove my early professional work when getting a PhD and then launching as an academic because I think one of the things when I was pursuing my PhD I always knew I wanted to shape public policy that’s partly why I wanted to study public policy and my theory of change back then was I have the evidence and I have the expertise so that it is difficult to discount me I can go to the doors of the hard working bureaucrats and elected officials who are our decision makers, draw their attention to the gap between what the evidence says we should be doing and what we are actually doing and then I would be the hero of this story that somehow I helped them see the gap in our ways and they would wish to close it. But the reality is that did present me potentially as the hero of the knowledge exchange story and that also is not an accurate picture of how public policy is going to be made. Because many a politician will often see that there is evidence suggesting we should be doing something as a society that we are not doing currently but they will have a number of challenges. One, there will be a range of kinds of evidence on multiple subjects that will be attracting their attention and how does the thing I think is particularly important going to bubble up to the top of their attention. And also politicians often require political cover to be courageous to act on the evidence when the evidence is going to cause us to change the status quo. And they’re especially going to need political cover when the evidence we’re putting out there requires them to reallocate resources. If it’s not going to save them money currently then it would be a question of do they have to raise more revenue to act or do they have to reallocate from elsewhere. Those are very complex issues for any public policy maker to do and they are made more complex if their society, if their constituency, their electorate is not out in front saying we want you to go ahead and do this. And really so much of the knowledge mobilization process if we want to talk about the great research we produce at this fabulous university of BC and the academy more generally we have to then start thinking that our knowledge translation work will be a process that requires as much planning, as much rigor, as much commitment over time as often as the production of the research required. That is a bit of a shift in the academy to be planning in that way, knowledge translation isn’t just something that we tack on and it highlights a tension in the academy. I think in the academy our current incentive structure is to constantly have us focus on “what’s the next interesting question we can answer?” and so we get one answer and we say that’s great we have that answer, now we move on to the next question lets answer that, and the next question and answer that.
And yet at the academy we have so many darn good answers that aren’t necessarily shaping our community locally, provincially, nationally, globally in the ways that if only it did the world would be a better place and so I think the academy at this moment is at a crossroads where it needs to think about how do we incentivize our research producers at least in some instances that that last answer was so darn important how do we support you right now to spend a considerable amount of time to make sure that our general public and our decision makers are aware of its importance and know what it means for the changes it will require from us individually, and collectively.

8:15 – 8:42 Well thank you for mentioning that. I wanted to go back to your approach your knowledge exchange approach because you mentioned that when you started you kind of imagined yourself as being the hero of this story, and that kind of change along the way and I read that Vancouver province described you as “a one man roadshow trying to change BC one talk at a time.”

8:42 – 14:43 Approach to Knowledge Exchange
Yeah, that was back in the day indeed when I was suffering from the folly that one person was going to manage alone to change public policy incentives for policy makers. So would you like me to speak a little bit more about that? I’m not wanting to suggest that one person can’t do a lot, I mean there’s these famous quotes about never overlook what a small group of people can do to make the world a better place, I didn’t quite nail the quote but people will understand the moral of that theme but let me tell you there’s something fundamentally different about when I take meetings with a decision maker today by comparison with when that quote came out probably a decade ago. Back in the day I would approach a decision maker as a faculty member you know so an authority on the subject. Respected and what not. But I didn’t bring a couple of other things that a decision maker would really value. I didn’t come representing a constituency and I didn’t come in such a way where I could facilitate the decision maker showing that she or he was consulting with an important constituency. But now when I go out as a result of the great work I do with colleagues who co-lead Generation Squeeze with me is I go as part of a network of now about 37,000 Canadians. And so we have a network or constituency that we represent where we can say we have thousands of people who are supporting us in this work and this call to action on behalf of government to invest more in childcare to close the harmful gap between local home prices and local earnings to make sure that we price pollution appropriately so we don’t leave an even larger environmental debt to younger generations going forward. So that we effectively organize our budgets fairly for young and old alike so this country works for all generations. Now when I have these conversations about the evidence with decision makers I sometimes will bring in other people with lived-experience to talk about how some of the shortcomings of our childcare policy or our housing policy or climate policy affecting them. More generally we can be a bit of a one-stop shop for policy makers, because policy makers as I mentioned earlier need political cover to act courageously on the evidence.

I’ll give you an example in regards to for instance what resulted in part of the first ever tax on empty homes in the continent of North America which we did hear in Vancouver with a previous Mayor before the change in government. And we had written a report it was called “Code Red” we were trying to draw attention to the emergency really that was this growing gap around 2015/2016 around housing
prices leaving earnings behind in the city we shared it around a number of decision makers including the Mayor’s office in Vancouver that resulted in yes a meeting with the Mayor but more importantly than that it resulted in the Mayor’s office asking if we could convene a dozen or so local renters who would come to share their experience about how difficult it was to rent in the city of Vancouver. And what it would mean to them if the home which are currently empty might be able to be put back in the supply and then add options to their providing homes to themselves and their children. We did do that and at a particular moment in that morning we had a breakfast meeting with the mayor we had one person’s story sort of stick out, particularly surprising to him. Because in this case it wasn't someone who was more like working poor who was struggling to find rental housing which there are too many of in Vancouver here it was a relatively young but nevertheless from an earnings standpoint affluent lawyer who had two kids who was desperately looking to find a place she could rent that had a third bedroom. And she struggled so much to find that, and was really finding that difficult. Then she knew that she was competing for rental with other people who have lower income than she did as a lawyer. And that was then just pushing that more sort of middle-income group to be out competing the working poor in the city which was then exacerbating our homelessness. So she then saw herself she can’t serve her kids and I’m part of this problem of homeless and her story really captured the attention both intellectually and emotionally with our Mayor who said ok. A few weeks later when we were actually coming to announce that the government of Vancouver was going to go ahead with the first ever tax on empty homes he asked if two things could happen, he could hold a press conference and if I would come to support on talking about the evidence about why empty homes are part of the problem they are not the entire problem but they are part of the problem and if we could have this woman come share her story and what happened he started the press conference by giving her the microphone she told her story again to the media he stepped up and said we are taxing empty homes to solve that problem. And that fundamentally changed the context in which this particular decision-maker was needing to quote on quote “sell the evidence” about why empty homes are a part of the problem contributing to housing unaffordability. And it allowed that story to help bring some of the evidence to light and that then made it more straightforward for the politician to be bold taking action that we hadn’t seen in the continent before. And that might not be seen by some colleagues on campus as part of the researcher’s responsibility and I’m not saying every researcher on campus needs to suddenly now commit to knowledge translation at the level I just described. But if you look at our strategic plan President Ono so carefully led for us the section on what is research excellence defines it as research production and knowledge mobilization. It is the combination of the two and that means we need to increasingly think through the various steps along the path towards bringing evidence into the world of politics to shape policy locally, provincially, nationally and globally. And there is work to keep producing excellent evidence but there’s also work about building a narrative, building a constituency cause ultimately I see there being six steps we need to take if you really want to get into the black box.

14:43 – Yes let’s go

14:43 – 16:30 Going from research to changing policy here are the six steps:

1. Step number one: make meaning of the research evidence you are producing in light of socioeconomic changes that are happening around people and values. You make that meaning in order to...
2. Shift public opinion to better align with the evidence that is being produced you then as you’re shifting opinion you’re...
3. Going to be framing people’s beliefs about the policy solutions available you’re doing that third step in order to eventually
4. Set an agenda, which leads us to the fifth step
5. To rally a coalition, a substantially large number of people around that agenda and then that brings us the sixth and culminating step
6. You’re going to mobilize that evidence, opinion and person power in the coalition to change the incentives to which politicians respond so that those incentives better align with the evidence because here’s the moral of the story that politics responds to those who organize and show up.

So I’ve just summarized for you the six steps from going from research production of evidence to mobilizing it in the world of politics that guides GenSqueeze on a day-to-day basis such that every action we take we are saying ok is this about making meaning, is this about shaping opinion, is this about framing beliefs, is this about setting an agenda, is this about building a coalition or now are we marshalling all of this stuff that we have in our favour that person power that evidence and opinion to change the incentives. And you’re not doing all of them simultaneously but you’re likely going to have to do all of those things at some point to move your evidence into action.

16:30 – 17:15 Thank you for summarizing all these steps it’s so helpful. So it makes it simpler to grasp but not necessarily easier to do. And so if I go back to even the first step “making meaning of evidence – connecting evidence to socioeconomic changes and things happening in the environment and also values. How do you do that, how do you create meaning, how do you find these stories, that will really speak to decision makers and how do you even convince people to come and talk about their stories in an authentic way?

17:16 – 24:19 Making meaning of evidence
Well let me begin before the invitation goes to people to tell their story, there’s work to do before that I would say and I’ll give you a concrete example. So part of my work is at the Human Early Learning Partnership or HELP which is based in the School of Population and Public Health at UBC and at HELP we have a mandate to create, promote and apply new interdisciplinary knowledge to help children and families thrive and I’ve been there for now 15 years plus and back in the day we produced evidence that documented what proportion of BC children were starting kindergarten every year vulnerable. Vulnerable in ways that meant they were more likely to fail, go to jail and wind up sick later on as adults in ways that could’ve been avoided. And the frightening number is it’s around one third of British Columbia children start vulnerable in that way and as a result it took so much to produce that evidence I literally gave hundreds and hundreds it may have added up to a thousand talks that started as follows: “Did you know that in BC nearly one third of BC children start kindergarten in ways that mean they are more likely to fail, go to jail or wind up sick. And did you know that the majority of those kids that are vulnerable actually aren’t in our lowest income households and neighbourhoods, yes that’s where the risks of vulnerability are greatest but the majority of those who are vulnerable are living in our upper and middle income houses and neighbourhoods because something big is going on in society that’s squeezing a generation of parents. And when you squeeze parents you squeeze their kids. So I led often early with the evidence about a third of people are vulnerable, a third of children being vulnerable. I did it hundreds and hundreds of times and I must confess that we weren’t making as much progress to
reduce early vulnerability as I would have liked. So after a while decided to set up the process of doing a focus group to figure out what people took away from my messaging. And the very frustrating thing is that I was a slow learner and I had to do it hundreds and hundreds of times because as soon as we did a focus group we learned that when we talked about a third of kids being vulnerable when parents heard that they said “oh my god what am I doing wrong?” I must be failing my children. And people went and individualized the problem. And even if someone said “oh it’s not me I’m doing ok by my kids but I can definitely see that there are a range of other lazy parents out there.”, then it would get gendered and moms in particular be sensitive like “am I spending too much time at work?” “am I not spending enough time at home?” “am I spending too much time at home and compromising on the earnings that we need to do.” And what was happening was that our evidence was actually, in particular, making women feel guilty. So they were leaning away from the evidence and it actually wasn’t the right meaning making. Because what our evidence was saying is there’s no individual problem going on something much bigger in society is happening. And so it was an eye opening moment for me that made me recognize to make meaning of our data about child vulnerability we actually had to go and do another darn research project which was to better be able to describe what’s happening in society that is to use my gensqueeze vernacular squeezing the generation with young kids. Which is how I eventually got focused on research around housing and then housing policy because one of things we wanted to show is that wow these high vulnerability rates and that the trend upwards in vulnerability in the province that we were reporting correlating at the same time as this rise in home prices leaving earnings behind which rising home prices is great if you had a home some decades ago just makes you wealthy but for those trying to get into the housing market what it means is you pay higher rents or your dreams of home ownership may be crushed or you take on massive amounts of debt and this really stresses a younger demographic out. And so now when I make meaning of these early development data, these vulnerability data about children I never start with it, I start by talking about what’s happening in society, I talk about how a younger demographic earns thousands of dollars less for full time work by comparison with forty decades ago when my mom started out, they earn thousands less even though they are twice as likely to go to post-secondary and that means so many more of us start with student debt for that privilege. And after going to school longer to land jobs that pay less we then face the remarkably amazing invitation to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars more for the chance to get into an average price home or just rising rents when our incomes can’t actually cover the costs of home ownership. And when we frame it that way then people say oh something big is going on and I can eventually bridge to them and say when you squeeze the generation raising young kids you cannot end up doing anything other than squeezing the kids that they are raising and suddenly then people don’t say “oh I’m individually failing my child.” And then we get rid of that guilt and people lean in to something systemically is happening and so instead of being guilty and feeling like a lack of confidence it’s like oh it’s not me, I’m not failing, something bigger is going on. And then we can help them figure out how their voice can make a difference and that’s then what leads into as we make meaning with them we actually ask for their help in making meaning because sometimes somebody’s story journalists notice better than anyone. You know why do journalists always want a story to accompany a research report because they want the story to bring the evidence to life. And human beings are particularly good at digesting evidence through stories and so the meaning making can happen now increasingly as part of our constituency. And indeed the team members on GenSqueeze who are more focused on the social media distribution work that we do we’re like a tiny team we’re like not even four people so don’t think we’re some behemoth out there it’s a really tiny enterprise with the talent and hardworking amazing people. But they’ll remind me, Paul when we get our evidence to be in people’s hands and that
they use it the more we actually lead with visuals the more people see themselves literally in the imagery with which we are conveying material. And these are some important insights about the way in which human beings digest information. And I’m not an expert about that.

But if anyone is interested in a book that I found really useful, actually two books, one would be the scholar Jonathan Haidt he’s you might want to call him a psychologist who would look at the evolution of moral intuition in human beings and just the role that values and intuitions play in our cognition and it’s called “The Righteous Mind: Why good people disagree about religion and politics” and the first two sections of the book are particularly good talking about how we need to appeal to people’s emotions in order to have them make sense of our evidence and then he’ll talk about the moral tastebuds that’s his metaphor that we should think about sensitizing when we are trying to attract people’s attention to our evidence and how it’ll make meaning. And another great book would be by a fellow named Jonas Sachs it’s a 2015 book called ‘Winning the story wars’ and you heard me earlier talk about who is the hero of the story and who’s the mentor or the femtor that might sound cheesy for an academic to talk in this ways but you’ll hear that language in Jonah Sachs. I’m totally borrowing it from his work because he will talk about why myths exist in societies over time and the way in which myths help people make meaning of the world around them. And so if we want as academics to think about how we can mobilize our evidence effectively in communication tactics at least learning from the way in which myths have played a role in informing people over time is a good tool to learn from.

24:19 – 25:00 Thank you, we’ll put the two titles on our website so people can refer to these books. Thank you for these deep thoughts, food for thought I would say and I would add that this podcast is intended to showcase and feature all this fabulous knowledge exchange work that some professors like you are doing so I just want to emphasize how passionate and committed to this work you are [doing] and I will end with this question because we’ve been covering so much ground but I just want to understand where does that drive come from?

25:01 – 28:32 Motivation behind change
Multiple places I mean on one hand if we had more time it would be a nod to my mom and the way in which she was a changemaker and continues to be throughout her life and wanted to live up to her model. More generally I am constantly amazed and feel privileged about being an academic and on the one hand few jobs you get to wake up in the morning and say I think this is interesting and I’m going to go learn more about it and study more about it but also I think this is interesting and not only can I learn more and study more about it, I can then help other people to come to learn and know about it. And I think that the academy is this space where we can be changemakers ourselves and we can be Gandolf to the Frodos out there in the community and we can mentor and femtor other changemakers off campus and for me I’m definitely the kind of academic who is excited to produce knowledge but always feels that just 7 people are reading it in this peer-reviewed journal, including my grandmother, that’s not enough. And are there ways to ensure that the work we do here addresses the big challenge of the day, for me that’s motivating and I feel a sense of urgency, I really do, now more than ever. I did not evolve as an academic focusing on climate change, I’m not a climate expert as an academic, I do policy that relates to taxation so I know a decent amount about pricing pollution but I feel a real urgency now they say we have a decade left to make the changes as a society, to bring us to a better place and a better
economy, a place where we'll be healthier and happier but if we don't make these changes right now to decarbonize our economy we're literally putting at risk, putting in jeopardy, the conditions in which younger Canadians and future generations depend for their health and wellbeing. And that's 2030 where we know the science is telling us need to have a dramatic reduction in our carbon emissions by then, we need to start now, we've been waiting too long but there might still be time to do a decent amount of that, to fend off the worst that climate change will otherwise inflict. But 2030 is also important because that's the year now in which the Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation which has responsibility for implementing our national housing strategy has said by 2030 we want every Canadian to be able to afford a home that meets their needs. And housing and climate change are becoming these two issues of how our economy is so unsustainable, these massive chasms that are deteriorating the standard of living for Canadians and putting at risk our wellbeing and so I see 2030 as being this really important timeline and by 2030 across the country we could actually also have Canada catch up to others in the industrial world and actually have a childcare system from coast to coast to coast that would make sure that parents can have enough time in the labour market to fend off the challenge of these massive housing costs relative to their earnings and do the work that's going to be required to help our economy shift to decarbonize. But simultaneously know that their kids are in safe, nurturing environments that supplement and never replace what they do at home but give them that time to breadwin, to give them time to be citizens to help fend off the risks of climate change, and simultaneously get our children off to the best start that they deserve so that all Canadians will have a chance. This is what motivates me, I want us all to have a chance, a chance to live up to our potential, enough time and money to enjoy life, and the opportunity to leave our city, province, country and planet better off than we found it.