

## **What is Policy Change? A Small Step on an Uneven Road**

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is very different from the one I originally set out to write. My original intent was to develop a typology of policy change. I wanted to produce something akin to the work of Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) on policy transfer or Christopher Hood (1986) on policy instruments. I soon realised, however, that there were many issues which I needed to work through first. Fundamentally, I needed to deal with the issues of ‘what is policy?’ and ‘what is change?’.

As a consequence, this paper is very much work-in progress. It maps out, as I see them, a number of different ways in which we can understand what constitutes policy and what constitutes change. It is NOT an attempt to explain the causes of change. I conclude with some pragmatic suggestions for taking forward the broader issue of ‘what is policy change?’.

## WHAT IS POLICY?

If we do not know what policy actually is, how can we know that it has actually changed? This simple premise belies immense complexity. University libraries throughout the world are lined with scholarly works on public policy. They include titles such as *Understanding Public Policy*, *Why Policy Matters*, *Policy Analysis for the Real World* and even simply *Policy*. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that definitions of policy rarely stretch beyond generalities and are certainly not capable of being operationalised. For example, Easton (1953: 13) suggests that policy is a ‘web of decisions and actions that allocate...values’. Dror (1983: 14) defines it as ‘general directives... on the main lines of actions to be followed’. Dye (2005: 1) defines public policy as ‘whatever governments chose to do or not to do’. Most public policy texts spend a few lines defining policy in very general terms, and then the rest of the book exploring substantive issues such as policy agendas, decision making forums, policy implementation, power over the policy process and longer-term policy trajectories.

It is likely that few would disagree with B. Guy Peters who suggests that: ‘Stated most simply, public policy is the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens’. Such generality is helpful in alerting us to the broad nature of public policy, but has clear limits if we want to refine our thinking. To conceive of a change in the sum of government activities, or a change in the influence on the life of citizens, is not fine-grained enough if we want to make the leap from understanding policy to understanding policy change.

Even two of the most influential contemporary works on policy and policy change do not shed any exceptional light on the nature of what ‘policy’ actually is. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) focus on long periods of policy stability, punctuated by periods of policy change but do not define the nature of what is changing. By looking at agenda change they examine whether an issue is on the political agenda and whether the tone or image of the policy is positive or negative. By using congressional records, their object of study is measured with a reasonable degree of accuracy. In effect, the extent and nature of the attention which policy actors give to an issue becomes a surrogate for policy. Sabatier and Jenkins Smith (1993) explore policy change and learning through the lens of ‘advocacy coalitions’ of actors and interests. Their assumption is

that changes in belief systems trickle down to changes in policy instruments, decisions, resource allocation and so on. Their approach is much more qualitative, with alterations in belief systems being explored through interviews, documents records and data where possible. Again, policy is not defined, but in effect the surrogate becomes the belief systems of coalitions of actors in policy sub-systems.

Overall, therefore, we have arrived at the situation whereby we have multiple conceptual perspectives which seek to explain policy change, but none clearly define what is actually changing. No doubt a large degree of pragmatism drives many academic studies. If a researcher is unable to clearly identify their object of analysis, they either produce an approximation which they can study, or they can ignore the issue and assume that everyone knows what is being examined. The plight of anyone grappling conceptually with 'policy' is clear.

How do we move forward? My first suggestion is to recognise the limits of what is possible. In ontological terms, it is not viable to produce a definition that will attract universal agreement. As Stoker and Marsh (2002) and Hay (2002) suggest, political science is pluralistic and there are no indications that eclectic deductive, inductive, quantitative and qualitative research assumptions and methods will converge.

My second suggestion, and one which will form the basis for the rest of this paper, is that we should use the diversity of thinking in public policy scholarship to our advantage. To explain: different scholars focus on different aspects of public policy. Some are concerned with issues such as processes of policy making (Lasswell, Easton), the power of particular groups of actors or interests in shaping public policy (Richardson and Jordan, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith), or how policies are put into practice (Pressman and Wildavsky). If we cannot hope to produce a definitive definition of policy, we can at least identify a number of different vantage points from which policy can be viewed. If we view policy as X, then we become alert to changes in X. If we view policy as Y, we become alert to changes in Y. In this regard, our vantage points will be policy as authoritative decision, policy as outcome, policy as process, policy as power and policy as ideas. Each of these vantage points opens up avenues for further exploration.

### **Policy as Authoritative Decision**

Perceiving policy as some form of authoritative decision or bundle of decisions is a common feature of many assumptions about policy. Dye's (2005: 1) definition of public policy as 'whatever governments choose to do or not to do' is typical. The literature on policy instruments and tools of government is a useful way of typologising authoritative decisions (see for example Hood 1986, Howlett and Ramesh 2003, Bardach 2005, Eledias et al. 2005; Hood and Margetts 2007). We can synthesise these into different authoritative policy instruments covering a spectrum from action to inaction:

*Laissez Faire:* Doing little or nothing. Leave others to deal with the problem, through markets or self reliance

*Persuasion:* Providing information and advice to encourage behavioural change in order to deal with the problem

*Finance:* Dealing with a problem by using the financial powers of government e.g. awarding grants, creating financial incentives to act in a particular way, creating financial disincentives to behave in particular way

*Legislation and Regulation:* A stronger attempt to deal with a problem by regulating behaviour, even to the extent of imposing legal obligations and rights

*Direct Government Action:* The strongest and most interventionist way of dealing with a problem. Government uses its own resources, staff and institutions e.g. to provide public services

Later in this paper we will deal directly with ways of assessing what ‘change’ actually is. Meantime, our assumptions will be more general in order to illustrate the logic that viewing policy as X alerts us to changes in X. Therefore, if policy change means that the instruments/change, at the very least we should consider change as constituting:

- Using a policy instrument that wasn’t previously used e.g. introducing parking meters and parking fines in an area where parking had previously been entirely at the discretion of motorists
- Ceasing to use an instrument that was previously used e.g. withdrawing government subsidy of business property taxes and leaving businesses to be responsible entirely for their taxes
- Making more extensive use of a particular instrument e.g. adding a new safety regulation to existing safety regulations for railway operators
- Making less extensive use of a particular instrument e.g. reducing the number of ‘don’t drink and drive’ campaigns

In many respects, political debate surrounding policy change focuses on arguments which are supportive of or opposed to government’s usage of particular policy instruments. For example, in Australia in 2007, part of the Labor and trade unions’ opposition to the Coalition Government’s industrial relations reforms centred on the exemption of small companies from unfair dismissal laws. In effect, opposition focused on policy change from an authoritative regulatory instrument to the authoritative sanctioning of a laissez faire instrument. Intellectually, therefore, as academics we may have difficulty in grasping the nature of a policy that has changed, but actors in policy arenas do not.

### **Policy as Outcome**

The focus here is the consequences that authoritative decisions have on society. Hogwood and Gunn (1984: 17) describe this as ‘what is actually achieved’. Immediately, however, we confront the problem of how to categorise outcomes for the purposes of thinking about how they may change. We could for example categorise outcomes in terms of the impact on particular sociological criteria such as race, class or gender. Or we could categorise the outcomes (as much of the policy evaluation literature does) in relation to whether targets were met, or whether key stakeholders were satisfied. There are difficulties in selecting any criteria for classifying outcomes because we are sure to introduce bias by giving privilege to some factors over others.

Subject to these qualifiers, a relatively simple typology can be derived from the formal intent of policies. Doing so is not to offer support for government intentions or ignore methodological difficulties associated with hidden intentions, contradictory objectives, interpretation and isolating the impact of government policy from other social forces. Rather, if we focus on the formal goals of public policies, we are more liable to capture much of the discourse and politicking surrounding whether government did what it set out to do, or whether the policy (the outcome) changed.

It is possible that the literature on policy implementation will help us classify various permutations of the intentions/outcomes relationship. For present purposes, however, a very simple classification would be:

- Policy outcomes which match original intentions e.g. government meets its target to build three more hospitals
- Policy outcomes which depart from original intentions e.g. government fails to keep interest rates below a target rate of 6%
- Policy outcomes which both match and do not match original intentions e.g. a government breast cancer screening program reduces the incidence of advanced breast cancer but does so only for the under-45 age group

The logic of what constitutes change is already contained in these latter two categories. Hence, outcomes which depart moderately or severely from the original intent (for reasons such as flawed policy design or ineffective implementation) can be conceived broadly as 'policy change'. It is certainly the case that groups may support/oppose government policy precisely *because* original intentions were met. However the point to be made here is that departures from outcomes open up policy space for critics to suggest that policy has changed – by accident or design. For example, the bullying and humiliation of prisoners at Abu Grahیب was a severe departure from official US policy on treatment of prisoners. If policy is broadly about what government does, then the activities of military personnel at Abu Grahیب was clearly a change in terms of what the Bush administration planned to do. Operationalising outcomes which depart from intentions is very difficult for academics to come to terms with, but once again, political actors do not have much trouble in identifying failures when they see them.

### **Policy as Process**

Policy is not just about authoritative decisions or societal outcomes, it is also about policy processes. Issues of process have been the concern of policy analysts down the years and have been reflected particularly in the works of Lasswell, Easton, Simon, Lindblom and Dror. The 'policy cycle' approach to public policy encapsulates the view that policy is (at least in part) about processes such as defining problems, managing agendas and exploring various policy options – often with consultation. *The Australian Policy Handbook*, now in its 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Althaus et al. 2007) represents that strand of policy analysis which sees the policy cycle as the fundamental starting point for our understanding of public policy. Colebatch (2006) is critical of the normative aspects of the *Handbook*, but expands the notion of process, arguing that 'the world of policy is populated by a range of players with distinct concerns, and that policy-

making is the intersection of these diverse agendas, not a collective attempt to accomplish some known goals' (Colebatch 2006: 1).

Before proceeding further we need to be aware of a counter argument i.e. that policy making processes are *not* policy. In other words, policy pertains to authoritative instruments such as laws, regulations and directives and the processes leading up to this are simply precursors to the real thing. However, I would argue that this argument is misguided for two reasons. First, policy formation processes involve the framing of issues, the narrowing of options, decisions to consult (who, when, where, how) and so on (Stone 2002). Even if we adopt Dye's (2005: 1) generalised definition of policy as 'whatever governments choose to do or not to do', then the choices of policy makers to frame issues in particular ways (e.g. water shortages framed as a problem of excess usage by consumers) or consult through particular mechanisms (e.g. referendum, citizen jury, meeting with major stakeholder), concerns government choice to act or not. Second, and related, such choices clearly spark political debate over why government is adopting a particular approach – often in comparison to historical precedents or what has happened in other policy sectors. So, if a lobby group asks government – 'why are we not being consulted on issue B when we were consulted on issue A?' this is in effect an issue of policy change.

If there is some legitimacy, therefore, in conceiving policy as process, the next step is to categorise processes in a meaningful way that will allow us to ascertain changes in these processes. Methodological and bias issues aside, a simple sub-division of the policy process is:

- Use of particular policymaking rules, procedures and norms
- Judgment on the part of policymakers as to which actors and interests to include/exclude at any particular stage in the policy making process
- Judgment on the part of policymakers as to which policy alternatives to include on the agenda for appraisal and which to exclude

Conceiving of policy change flows fairly easily from these categories by adding 'A change in...' at the front of each. Changes in rules, procedures and norms are similar to the work of Bachrach and Baratz (1970) on the strengthening of the 'mobilization of bias. An example of both the first and second forms of change can be found in 2003 when Spain banned membership of Batasuna (the political party associated with Basque separatists ETA) in an attempt to disengage supporters of terrorism from participation in liberal political processes. Regarding change in consideration of policy alternatives, an infamous UK example occurred in 1986 when the Thatcher government heavily favoured a poll tax as a viable option in the reform of local government taxation, while having previously ruled it out as a viable option for consideration when the previous review culminated in 2003.

### **Policy as Power**

Another vantage point from which to view policy is in terms of who holds power as a consequence of the interactions of various actors, institutions and interests involved in the policy process. There is clearly overlap with other perspectives – the most obvious being 'policy as process'. However, it deserves separate consideration because one of the main concerns of many analysts is to understand who is powerful over the content

of public policy. Scholarly works in this field are too numerous to mention but would include:

- Intergovernmental Relations: issues of mutual dependence and the disaggregation of power (Rhodes)
- Veto players: the circumstances under which particular actors have veto over policy change (Tsebelis)
- Advocacy Coalitions: the powers of dominant and competing advocacy coalitions of interests over the trajectory of public policy (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith)
- Policy Monopolies: The relatively unstable power of policy monopolies over the long-run in shaping the course of public policy (Baumgartner and Jones)
- Policy Communities and Issue Networks: The size, coherence, resources and power of different amalgamations of actors and interests (Marsh and Rhodes)
- Inheritance: The power of past decisions and commitments to constrain policy making choices (Rose and Davies)

Developing such perspectives into a ‘policy as power’ typology cannot avoid bias and framing, but it does seem possible to come up with a very simple typology that is relatively uncontentious:

- The power of a particular actor within the policy process
- The power of a particular institution within the policy process
- The power of a particular interest within the policy process

Logically, once again, the words ‘A change in...’ can be added in front of these if we want a simply typology of policy change if our focus is on aspects of power in policy processes. Identifying and measuring power is a perennial problem (as Lukes clearly demonstrates) but this simple logic of change does seem to encapsulate many debates and issues surrounding policy change. Therefore, lame duck presidents, the declining power of FEMA since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security or the rise in the power of environmental groups all amount to broadly the same phenomena i.e. a change in who or what holds power over public policy.

### **Policy as Ideas**

David Eastons’s (1965) view of political life as the ‘authoritative allocation of values’ contains the early seeds of many subsequent works on public policy. John Kingdon’s (1995) multiple streams model of policy processes places ideas at stage centre of his model of agenda change. Peter John (1998) also places particular emphasis on the evolution of ideas as a significant factor in explaining stability and change. For others, ideas are framed in different ways (e.g. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith on ‘policy beliefs’ and Baumgartner and Jones on ‘policy images’) and are more the product of internal and external influences rather than the key driving forces. However, given that our

focus is on thinking about what policy actually is rather than what actually causes it to change, a common strand is that when we talk about policy, we also talk about ideas.

How, then, do we deal with categorisation of ideas in a meaningful and relatively uncontentious way? A simple approach, sharing much in common with 'policy as outcome' is to consider defining policy ideas from the perspective of policy makers. Again, doing so offers neither support nor criticism of government ideologies. It is simply one approach, which helps capture much of the debate surrounding policy and policy change. Therefore, from the vantage point of ideas, we can define policy as: *the values and beliefs which legitimise public policy*. The converse then becomes: *a change in the values and beliefs which legitimise public policy*.

Simple as these statements are, they do seem to capture something of political debate surrounding policy change. Since 9/11, for example, many human rights groups in countries such as Australia, Spain the UK and the US, have attacked their governments for undergoing an ideological shift which sacrifices civil liberties in order to prevent terrorist attacks. Of course, issues of interpretation will always make identifying change difficult – and indeed these governments and others may well argue that there has been no change. In other words, they would argue that protecting human rights (including the right to life) has always been a priority, and just because the threats have changed, doesn't mean to say that government has deviated from this core commitment. We cannot deny interpretation, but we can at least say that policy is (at least in part) about the ideas that legitimise policy. Therefore, ideational change can be policy change.

## **WHAT IS CHANGE?**

So far, this paper has attempted to grapple with some of the issues surrounding the question 'what is policy?'. It has already dealt in a very general way with the notion of change but now needs to focus clearly on the question: 'what is change?'.

The first point to make is that the nature of change has been at the very heart of philosophy. The works of Heraclitus, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Marx have all contended with the nature of change, whether in terms of the nature of the individual in the universe, or change as the dialectical unfolding of contradictions. Such issues have been far from the forefront of public policy studies (perhaps the structure vs agency debate is closest) although there is certainly more substantive attention paid to the nature of 'change' than to the nature of 'policy'.

Most public policy scholars who deal with change do so in the context of learning. However, learning is something of a distraction if we want to contend with issue of change. Learning has positive, Hegelian tones, implying that particular changes are for the greater good: beneficial to individuals, organizations or societies. However, as Fischer (2003: 11) suggests:

In short, learning for one person may not be learning for another person with a different political ideology. No amount of data, regardless of how well tested and verified it might be, will convince a person that anything important or useful has been presented if, in his or her view, the findings lead to policy judgements that take him or her in the wrong direction...For

such a person, the findings will not be considered learning per se. Or, alternatively, if they are, they will not be viewed positively.

Whatever our view on the extent that perceptions matter, it is evident that policy changes may be perceived as more, or less, desirable by different actors and interests. To continue the previous example, while George W. Bush would argue that the US has learned the lessons of 9/11 through homeland security reforms to ensure America is less vulnerable to terrorist attack, critics would argue that the US has failed to learn lessons because its flawed international incursions in Afghanistan and Iraq have increased the likelihood of attack, while its homeland security reforms have been shambolic.

With policy change and learning entwined in much academic literature, we need to try and disentangle the change dimension. In this regard, if we take many of the classic works on this topic, there are in fact substantial similarities in assumptions about the nature of change (May 1992, Hall 1993, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993, Rose and Davies 1994). Their terminologies differ and they are certainly not identical in their assumptions, but it is possible to produce a synthesis with relative ease:

- *Organisational change*: refinements in rules and procedures, typically of those organisations implementing public policy
- *Legislative/policy directive change*: alterations in core policies by political executives and legislatures
- *Societal change*: Deeper paradigm changes in social values

This typology takes us some way towards an understanding of different types of change, but it does not deal with what change actually is. Given the difficulties of doing so, it is perhaps understandable that the issue has been avoided. Indeed, to take Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) as an example, their highly influential book *Policy Change and Learning* does not have 'policy change' or even 'change' listed in the Index.

How do we move forward on this issue? In my view, Colin Hay's (2002) book *Political Analysis* provides pointers in terms of the direction we should proceed in our thinking. He identifies three main analytical strategies for conceptualising the process of political change. Each poses many methodological difficulties (I will deal with some of these shortly) but let us first identify each approach:

*Synchronic Analysis*: 'freezes the object of analysis in time, thereby focusing attention on the structure of social or political relations at a specific instant' (Hay 2002: 144). This approach is analogous to taking a photograph and examining it to assess a state of affairs at a particular point in time.

*Comparative Statics Analysis*: a refinement of the synchronic approach and a logical progression if we want to think about change. It involves comparing the 'photographs' at different points in time. This is similar to the approach outlined by Kay (2006) of comparing a thing at state  $S_1$  at time  $T_1$ , with state  $S_2$  and time  $T_2$ .

*Diachronic Analysis:* focuses on dynamic, historical changes over time rather than comparing a state of affairs at two different points in time. To continue with the photograph analogy, a diachronic analysis is the equivalent of a video, following the motion of the object under scrutiny.

If we assume (as Hay does) that the synchronic approach is actually a variation on the comparative statics one, despite the methodological problems involved in operationalising such approaches (including who is taking the photograph/video and what angle it is filmed from), they do in fact capture much of the spirit of political debate and policy practice surrounding policy change. For example, in Australia the NTEU (National Tertiary Education Industry Union) recently ran a campaign against the decline of funding levels for universities. The campaign was based on comparative statistics in 1995 (under the Labor administration) and 2006 (under the Liberal Coalition government). A diachronic approach would be more likely to frame change as a 'downward spiral', driven by tensions and contradictions.

Despite the comparative statics and diachronic approaches as holding potential to capture political debate surrounding policy change, they are not 'hard science'. At the very least, there are a number of methodological difficulties. Four are worth highlighting.

*Interpretation:* The nature of political life is contested and no amount of 'evidence' can escape the reality that depending on the narrative we adopt to explain the nature of change, different narratives of policy explanation will give privilege to different sets of factors (Cairney 2007). For example, taking a 'policy as power perspective', tobacco policy in the UK can be viewed through an incremental narrative (in which case recent legislative changes are ongoing small steps in the declining power of tobacco companies) or a dominant narrative (in which case recent changes are a radical shift against the power of tobacco companies, after many years of symbolic policies and tokenism to anti-smoking groups).

*Dynamics:* The comparative statics approach cannot consider the pathway which connects two states of affairs (Kay 2006). Therefore, while we can say for example that a government shifted from a persuasion-based policy instrument which encouraged people not to smoke in public places to a regulatory policy instrument which bans smoking in public places, we do not have a sense of the processes, influences and change states between these 'starting' and 'end' points.

*Context:* Using and comparing 'snapshots' (or even watching 'videos') will often tell us little about the political, social and economic contexts of change. Of course, we could argue that such factors are more important in explaining *causes* of change rather than the *nature* of change. But public policy does not exist in a vacuum. A particular policy instrument may stay the same but a change in context can be used to argue that the policy has changed. In 2004 when the French Government used an old curfew law dating from 1955 to quell riots in several of its major cities, critics suggested that such tactics constituted a draconian change of track.

*Stability and change as duality or dualism:* Can stability and change co-exist, and if so, in what form? If stability and change is a dualism, they are essentially separate i.e. we can have a period of stability and then a period of change. From this perspective,

for example, post-war economic Britain exhibited stability in the 1945-75 period, then rapid change after the IMF crisis and the election of the Thatcher Government. If stability and change is a duality, then the relationship in interactive and iterative (Marsh 2006). In the British economic example, the post-1976 fiscal retrenchment and public expenditure could also mark a continuity of capitalist economics.

## **CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD**

In my mind, we now have a choice in terms of how we move forward. We can either: (a) be relatively content with the policy change typologies of Sabatier, Rose et al. and continue to debate the methodological difficulties of their approaches and of any alternatives or (b) try to develop a more fine-grained understanding of the nature of policy change, while recognising the intellectual difficulties in doing so. There is no magical solution to this choice. Much depends on the goal of policy analysis. The recent *Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* (Moran et al. 2006) contains five chapters on why we conduct policy analysis: to solve puzzles, listen critically to what people are saying, give policy advice, improve democracy and critique society. Many researchers will adopt different approaches for different pieces of research. My own instincts here probably have elements of them all, but ‘puzzling’ is probably the most important. If we do want to push the boundaries of our understanding beyond some very general typologies of policy change, we need to be pragmatic, making an advance but recognising the limitations. To come back to the title of the paper, we need to make a small step on an uneven road.

On this basis, the comparative statics approach would seem to be a useful way forward. It is certainly flawed (for the reasons detailed) but if we combine it with the thinking surrounding ‘what is policy?’ in the first half of this paper, it is a first pragmatic stab at how might conceptualise the nature of policy change. Taking it further requires: (i) continuing to explore the potential for policy and policy change to be viewed from different vantage points (ii) identifying the evidence needed to track policy over time and (iii) conducting detailed empirical cases. The diachronic approach may intellectually be the more attractive option but in my view it is a step too far at the moment. I am certainly a bit uneasy at casting aside undoubted methodological difficulties in tacking the nature of policy change. But this is something that researchers do as a matter of course anyway– it is simply a matter of degrees. Understanding policy change requires a strong dose of pragmatism, if only to see where the path leads. To continue the metaphor, our compass should be questions of ‘what is policy?’ and ‘what is change?’, even if the steps are small and the ground is uneven.

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