

In the previous chapter the commonplace idea of a journey was used both to illustrate the logic of the stages model and to indicate problems about that approach. This chapter and the next two separate the analysis of the policy process along the lines suggested by the journey metaphor. This chapter is about deciding where to go (agenda setting), the next about deciding how to get there (formulation or policy programming) and the third about seeing (implementation). We start therefore not merely with a warning about seeing policy-making stages as neatly separable in these terms but also with the observation that readers are likely to note ways in which – in order to provide a coherent account of relevant ideas and theories – the author will have to depart from the divisions implied by the chapter headings.

Introduction

This will be followed by considering an approach to this topic which can be said to come out of incrementalism but goes considerably further, in stressing more strongly the relative absence of a consistent or 'rational' process. This is Kingdon's model of the agenda-setting process. The strengths and weaknesses of that model are then examined.

SYNOPSIS

After a brief comment on the difficulties about separating a distinct 'agenda setting' stage in the policy process, the starting point for the discussion of that will be a sociological analysis of the way in which public problems emerge. This points us in a very different direction to the prescriptive literature's concern about how policies should be made. The first challenge to the prescriptive so-called 'rational model' came from a literature that suggested that most decision making is 'incremental' in nature. The incrementalist perspective will thus be examined.

Agenda setting

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The agenda setting/formulation distinction is a particularly difficult one to make, since in the modern world we very rarely see an issue that is entirely new appearing on the agenda. Moreover, where this does happen there is often a very strong and complex interaction between the initial stages of that process and those that immediately follow it as it is translated into a more concrete form. It is also important to bear in mind that in some circumstances policy may be initiated and changed without formal legislation. In Chapter 7, the examples from foreign policy and economic policy both largely fell into this category.

In looking at agenda setting we are clearly being taken back to Chapter 4 where the theoretical issues about explaining change in a context of institutional continuity were explored. Here we examined Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) concept of 'punctuated equilibrium' suggesting that feedback from policy decisions generates change which builds up critical problems over time, Streeck and Thelen's (2005) distinction between 'incremental' and 'abrupt' change and Pollitt and Bouckaert's (2009) exploration of the relationship between the extent of change and the type of change. While we will see a tendency for the agenda-setting literature to be concerned with more clear-cut change there are, even in the most stable administrative systems, processes of change occurring all the while.

Sometimes agenda-setting processes and further policy formulation can be distinguished, and sometimes not. The two examples of this policy (used in Chapters 1 and 6 of this book) – the right to roam and the reduction of poverty – illustrate this very clearly. The former can easily be examined in terms of a specific policy commitment (put on the agenda by a political manifesto) and subsequent rather detailed work that had to be done to translate that in to action. The second on the other hand required (and indeed is still requiring) a whole range of detailed decisions about tax rates, minimum wage legislation, social benefit rules and so on.

What is a policy issue or problem?

It is appropriate to start examining agenda setting by taking a step back to ask: where do the issues or problems that get on the political agenda come from? No objective fact constitutes a problem in itself (Cobb and Elder, 1983, p. 172; Dery, 1984, p. xi). The – social and then political – definition of a matter that needs attention always represents a collective construction directly linked to the perceptions, representations, interests and values of the actors concerned. It always depends on persons affected by the issue and/or those whose behaviour may need to change to solve it.

There is a need here to recognise that there are issues that may be regarded as private concerns or problems for specific individuals. These may be quite specific to the individuals themselves, or they may be problems shared with others. If we take the issue of poverty, there are two separate but related questions: (a) is that condition shared with others and (b) inasmuch as

it is shared is it seen as appropriate to try to take collective action to deal with the problem? From an examination of the history of concerns about poverty we may note evidence that it is more than an isolated problem, but also a widely propagated view that it is an individual problem (explainable in terms of the moral incapacities of the individuals concerned and their lack of efforts to remedy the situation). The latter can then be observed to have been challenged ideologically by arguments that the causes of poverty lie in phenomena other than individual culpability, and practically by social movements to attack those causes. We thereby may see the translation of individual issues into social problems.

That analysis can then be taken a stage further. Gusfield (1981) makes a distinction between 'social problems' and 'public problems', noting that all social problems do not necessarily become public problems; that is objects of political controversy. Hence, public problems represent an extension of social problems to the extent that, having emerged within civil society, they are debated within an emerging political arena. In this sense, the definition of a public problem is essentially political in nature. In other words, a problem becomes public by being put on the political agenda. At this stage of the definitional process, public actors (for example, the administration, government, parliament) recognise the need to consider a possible state solution to the identified problem.

The transfer of a problem or issue from the social sphere to the public sphere involves public actors as orchestrators of the agenda-setting process. Modern political history can be seen as involving the enlargement of the public agenda in this way. While this attributes a proactive role to the public actors, it must, however, be stressed that the passage of a public problem is neither linear nor inevitable. Many issues on the agenda today were not on it in the past. But equally there are issues that are not on the agenda that could be on it. It is interesting to observe, for example, that whilst public policy today is less concerned about issues about people's private sexual behaviour it seems to be becoming more concerned about what (or how much) we eat and drink. Questions about whether it is appropriate for certain issues to be on the agenda lie at the centre of ideological conflict in societies.

It was noted earlier (see Chapter 2) that, contrary to the pluralistic vision of democracy which assumes that every actor may access the decision-making arena to thematise a particular problem, Bachrach and Baratz (1970) and Lukes (1974, 2005) assert that a specific form of public power consists precisely in the possibility of keeping certain social problems off the public agenda.

From the rational model of policy decision making to incrementalism

The need for a political analysis of the way in which issues get onto the agenda developed out of a disquiet with earlier models of the policy process. Here we encounter one of those issues (explored in Chapter 1), about distinguishing

between a prescriptive and a descriptive approach to policy analysis. As far as agenda setting is concerned, contemporary descriptive analysis has its roots in dissatisfaction with a prominent prescriptive model, where it was argued that it is unrealistic to analyse policy problem-solving using a rational model essentially rooted in a view of what *should* happen.

Since the very beginnings of attempts to develop an academic approach to administration, efforts have been made to formulate guidance on how to secure the 'best' decisions. At the heart of this lies a perspective that does not recognise the complex relationship between problem identification and action described above. That perspective requires problem-solving behaviour to be unsullied by politics: an impartial search for the best solution. The contemporary emphasis upon 'evidence based policy' (see Davies *et al.*, 2000, for a discussion of this) seems to sum up this aspiration. Yet insightful prescriptive policy analysis recognises the problems about achieving this. Perhaps the most influential figure in this respect has been Herbert Simon (1957) who, while he is often presented as the exponent of the so-called 'rational model' of policy making, in fact recognises the 'limits' upon the achievement of that ideal. Much of what he says on this belongs (in terms of what has already been acknowledged as an obscure boundary between agenda setting and policy formulation) rather more to the next chapter than to this one, so we return to that there. Hence aspects of a long-standing debate about decision making, driven by prescriptive concerns but inevitably spilling over into questions about what actually happens, will be split between this chapter and the next.

The concern here is with the way in which the rational model was challenged by an argument that it goes further than Simon in seeing it as an unrealistic view of how policy decisions are made. The key protagonist here was Charles Lindblom. His work is confusing because he revised his position several times.

Lindblom is critical of the rational-comprehensive method prescribed for decision making. In its place, he sets out an approach he calls 'successive limited comparisons' which starts from the existing situation and involves changing policy incrementally. In describing decision making by successive limited comparisons, Braybrooke and Lindblom note eight ways in which the rational-comprehensive model fails to adapt to the real world of policy decision making (set out in Box 9.1).

Consequently, Braybrooke and Lindblom argue, decision making in practice proceeds by successive limited comparisons. This simplifies the decision-making process not only by limiting the number of alternatives considered to those that differ in small degrees from existing policies, but also by ignoring the consequences of some possible policies. Further, deciding through successive limited comparisons involves simultaneous analysis of facts and values, means and ends. As Lindblom states, 'one chooses among values and among policies at one and the same time' (1959, p. 82). That is, instead of specifying objectives and then assessing what policies would fulfil these objectives, the decision maker reaches decisions by comparing specific policies and the extent to which these policies will result in the attainment of objectives.

Braybrooke and Lindblom's eight reasons why the rational approach fails to deal with real-world decision making

Box 9.1

- limited human problem-solving capacities;
 - situations where there is inadequacy of information;
 - the costliness of analysis;
 - failures in constructing a satisfactory evaluative method;
 - the closeness of observed relationships between fact and value in policy making;
 - the openness of the system of variables with which it contends;
 - the analyst's need for strategic sequences of analytical moves;
 - the diverse forms in which policy problems actually arise.
- Source: Summarised from Braybrooke and Lindblom (1963)

Disjunctive incrementalism as a decision strategy

Box 9.2

Disjunctive incrementalism involves examining policies which differ from each other incrementally, and which differ incrementally from the *status quo*. Analysis is not comprehensive but is limited to comparisons of marginal differences in expected consequences. Using disjunctive incrementalism, the decision maker keeps on returning to problems, and attempts to ameliorate those problems rather than to achieve some ideal future state. What is more, decision makers adjust objectives to available means instead of striving for a fixed set of objectives. Braybrooke and Lindblom note that disjunctive incrementalism is characteristic of the United States, where 'policy-making proceeds through a series of approximations. A policy is directed at a problem; it is tried, altered, tried in its altered form, altered again, and so forth' (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963, p. 73).

Lindblom argues that incrementalism is both a good description of how policies are actually made, and a model for how decisions should be made. Prescriptively, one of the claimed advantages of what he calls 'muddling through' is that serious mistakes can be avoided if only incremental changes are made. By testing the water the decision maker can assess the wisdom of the moves he or she is undertaking and can decide whether to make further progress or to change direction. This is developed at some length by Lindblom and his collaborators. In *A Strategy of Decision* (1963), David Braybrooke and Lindblom describe in detail the strategy of disjunctive incrementalism, which is a refinement of the successive limited comparisons method. That of course takes us back into the prescriptive debate, hence its features are merely summarised in Box 9.2.

This theme of coordination is taken up in Lindblom's *The Intelligence of Democracy* (1965). 'Partisan mutual adjustment' is the concept Lindblom develops to describe how coordination will be achieved in the absence of a central coordinator. Partisan mutual adjustment is the process by which independent decision makers coordinate their behaviour. It involves adaptive adjustments 'in which a decision-maker simply adapts to decisions around him', and manipulated adjustments 'in which he seeks to enlist a response desired from the other decision-maker' (ibid., p. 33). Each of these forms of adjustment is further divided into a variety of more specific behaviour, including negotiation and bargaining. In a later article, Lindblom (1979) notes that although there is no necessary connection between partisan mutual adjustment and political change by small steps, in practice the two are usually closely linked. This has been shown (by Harrison *et al.*, 1990, pp. 8-13) to be a weakness in Lindblom's argument since a sequence of essentially incremental changes may well occur in a context in which certain parties are dominating and therefore 'mutual adjustment' is not occurring. This, they contend, has been characteristic of change in British health policy, where until recently medical interests have dominated.

Lindblom accepts, in his later work, that partisan mutual adjustment is only active on ordinary questions of policy. Certain grand issues such as the existence of private enterprise and private property and the distribution of income and wealth are not resolved through adjustment. Rather, because of 'a high degree of homogeneity of opinion' (1979, p. 523) grand issues are not included on the agenda. Lindblom adds that this homogeneity of opinion is heavily indoctrinated, and in *Politics and Markets* he explores the operation of ideology. Lindblom's argument is that in any stable society there is a unifying set of beliefs which are communicated to the population through the church, the media, the schools and other mechanisms (1977, Chapter 15). These beliefs appear to be spontaneous because they are so much taken for granted, but they favour, and to some extent emanate from, dominant social groups.

There is thus a shift in Lindblom's position from one in which bargaining is seen as inevitable (and desirable) to one in which ideology is seen to play a role, though essentially the latter has a limited influence upon the range of actors and options going into the bargaining process.

The rationalism/incrementalism debate may be beside the point when it is party-political commitment or ideology rather than either rational planning or 'partisan mutual adjustment' that drives the policy debate. The following scenario is surely by no means unlikely:

1. A problem arises in which it is difficult for government to develop an effective response - its causes are unknown, or beyond the reach of government action, or are phenomena with which the government is reluctant to deal (for example, economic influences upon crime).
2. Nevertheless, the key policy actors want to be seen to be 'in control', or at least doing something (they have made claims that they can manage the economy, combat crime, solve international conflicts).

3. In addition, some of the actors are driven by strong ideologies (particularly important as far as politicians are concerned).

4. The result is a series of actions that are presented as problem solving but which may equally be the thrashing around of a system that needs to be seen as active but does not really know what to do (in these circumstances it is important not to be deceived by the rational action language politicians are likely to use).

It is also vital to see agenda-setting processes in their institutional contexts. Such constraints make both 'rational' policy planning and 'partisan mutual adjustment' difficult. March and Olsen argue that 'insofar as political actors act by making choices, they act within definitions of alternatives, consequences, preferences (interests), and strategic options that are strongly affected by the institutional context in which the actors find themselves' (March and Olsen 1996, p. 251). We also saw that in some of their work March and Olsen seem to go even further, seeing the way policies emerge as being similar to the way rubbish accumulates in a 'garbage can' (Chapter 4, pp. 81-4). An alternative, institutional theory-linked approach to this issue which picks up on all the points emphasised in this paragraph is Kingdon's analysis of agenda setting.

Kingdon's model of the agenda-setting process

Kingdon originally set out his model in a book published in 1984. He updated that book in 1995. This discussion is based upon the latter book. Kingdon's work is a study of policy agenda setting in the United States. Kingdon describes his approach to the analysis of agenda setting as follows:

Comprehensive, rational policy making is portrayed as impractical for the most part, although there are occasions where it is found. Incrementalism describes parts of the process, particularly the gradual evolution of proposals or policy changes, but does not describe the more discontinuous or sudden agenda change. Instead of these approaches, we use a revised version of the Cohen-March-Olsen garbage can model of organizational choice to understand agenda setting and alternative generation. We conceive of three process streams flowing through the system - streams of problems, policies, and politics. They are largely independent of one another, and each develops according to its own dynamics and rules. But at some critical junctures the three streams are joined, and the greatest policy changes grow out of that coupling of problems, policy proposals, and politics. (Kingdon, 1995, p. 19)

It is important to note the way in which Kingdon associates his analysis with the garbage can model. He thus dissociates himself from traditional positivist American political science, which searches for universal testable propositions.

He sees the policy process instead as in many respects chaotic and unpredictable. In that sense the use of the term model is open to challenge by those who prefer to apply that term to something rather more precise (see Sabatier, 2007, p. 6). However, Kingdon aims to offer an approach that helps us to understand what goes on even if we cannot easily predict outcomes.

An aspect of Kingdon's approach that is widely quoted is his alternative metaphor to the garbage can, 'primaeval soup'. This is a reference to the way in which modern explanations of the early stages of biological evolution see change occurring because genetic combinations occurred in the shapeless, soup-like environment, in which only some of them proved successful and thus led on to subsequent developments. But this is just an analogy, and one which should be treated with caution.

What is more important for his theory is the notion that in the soup-like environment that is the modern policy process there are three streams: problems, policies and politics. Simpler explanations of the policy process have seen policies as designed to solve problems, but the weakness of such approaches is that problems themselves are socially constructed (Berger and Luckman, 1975). Kingdon suggests it can often be the case that there are policies looking for problems: things key actors want to do that need justifications. He identifies the presence of what he calls 'policy entrepreneurs' who do this. These people may be politicians or civil servants or pressure group leaders with issues they want to put on the public agenda. They are, he says, like 'surfers waiting for the big wave' (Kingdon, 1995, p. 225), on the look-out for a combination of public concern about a problem and political interest in doing something about it.

Kingdon's primaeval soup image is intended to convey the way in which the policy process environment is forever changing, hence opportunities for agenda setting come and go with shifting attention to issues, influenced by the short attention span of the media and the changing needs of politicians in the course of the electoral cycle (this observation echoes earlier work by Downs suggesting that there is an 'issue-attention cycle' in politics, 1972, p. 38). Kingdon shifts into yet another image here, of windows that open briefly and then close. He recognises the importance of feedback from existing policies into the agenda-setting process. He also identifies what he calls 'spillovers', the impact of one policy change on other policies. These two elements – feedback and spillovers – may be important for the problem identified with regard to both network theory and institutional theory: that despite evidence of the existence of strong forces towards stability in the policy process, there are spells of quite intense change in many systems. What may appear to involve marginal change can have major consequences.

It has been mentioned that Kingdon's book is only about the United States (and in practice only about the federal government). It seems amazing that a book that offers a general approach to the analysis of agenda setting should have no references whatsoever to the process outside the United States. But his approach has been applied to other situations. Particularly interesting in this respect is Zahariadis' use of it in challenging the interpretation of European Union policy making which explains 'policy outputs as a function

of the rational design of institutions; Zahariadis stresses the vitality of the three streams and the dynamic coupling processes that occur making 'ambiguity... an integral part of EU policy making' (2008, p. 527).

Developments of Kingdon's approach

Birkland's research on 'focussing events' offers support for Kingdon's perspective (see Box 9.3). When the 'big wave' comes, problems, policies and politics may be coupled to form the policy agenda. This is not necessarily a simple process. Kingdon makes a distinction between 'agendas' and 'alternatives', recognising that there is competition at this time.

Another approach to events which create opportunities for policy change involves an emphasis on policy fiascos (Bovens and 't Hart, 1996; Gray and 't Hart, 1998). Here, of course, the problems that force their attention on policy makers are the consequences of earlier policies. In this case, then, we see feedback cycles in the policy process and also a variation on Kingdon's theme of the impact of 'feedback and spillovers' on the policy process.

A related concern is with the impact of crises. Bovens *et al.*'s (2001) comparative study emphasises ways in which crises force attention to be given to problems, looking then at different ways in which governments respond to problems.

Kingdon sees his approach to the agenda-setting process as building on incrementalist theory in its rejection of the 'rational' problem-solving model. But he argues that not all change is incremental and that incrementalist theory tends to disregard issues about the way streams join and policy windows open. He sees his approach as superior to a pluralist perspective inasmuch as he is interested in the way key actors both inside and outside government come together. Similarly, for him network theory and the work on policy communities neglect issues about coupling and about variations in the extent to which behaviour is unified. His perspective can be seen as

Box 9.3

Birkland's (1998) analysis of the impact of focussing events

Birkland studied the impact of disasters (hurricanes and earthquakes) and industrial accidents (oil spills and nuclear power disasters) on the policy agenda in the United States. Interestingly, he links Kingdon's analysis of 'problems' with the network and policy communities perspective (explored in Chapter 4). He shows that focussing events may serve to bring attention to problems on the agenda, but that 'an event is more likely to be focal if an interest group or groups are available to exploit the event... (Birkland, 1998, p. 72)

institutionalist in approach, in the light of its emphasis on the significance of actors both inside and outside government and its recognition of the impact of earlier decisions on current ones. Indeed, in his second edition he recognises the parallels between his approach and that of Baumgartner and Jones (1993) in their analysis of punctuated equilibrium.

Kingdon's examination of the roles of policy entrepreneurs fits well with the modern developments in institutional theory that emphasise ideas. But this emphasis involves a very different perspective on the roles of experts in the policy process than that implied by those who call for more 'evidence-based policy'. That emphasis has led to a concern with the circumstances under which evidence is taken seriously, whilst Kingdon's emphasis on opening windows suggests a rather more haphazard linking of (a) political contingencies and (b) unsolved policy problems. Other writers go further in seeing this linking as very dependent upon power and ideology. There are issues here about the organisation of expert 'epistemic communities', which Haas describes as 'the transmission belts by which new knowledge is developed and transmitted to decision-makers' (2004, p. 587). Haas raises issues about the ideological compatibility between these communities and powerful political actors. As a topic this falls between issues about agenda setting and issues about policy formulation and will be revisited in the next chapter.

Applying Kingdon's model: does it underplay the ways in which agenda setting may be structured?

This section takes further the proposition, advanced above, that despite its apparent American ethnocentrism Kingdon's approach is of value for the analysis of agenda setting elsewhere, using a policy issue that is on the agenda in all developed countries: pensions. Exploration of policy agenda setting in respect of pensions illustrates the value of Kingdon's approach, but also enables the identification of some limitations.

In many countries (and particularly in Europe) there have been three phases in pension policy making:

- A first phase, in which, in most countries, relatively rudimentary public pensions were provided for only some groups in the population.
- A second phase of consolidation, involving either the development of comprehensive public schemes or the formation of combinations of public and private provisions.
- A third phase, in which, while development and consolidation issues are still on the agenda, a key policy preoccupation is with cutting public pension commitments and there are efforts to promote private pensions.

Tables 9.1 to 9.3 summarise the issues that influence the prospects of pension issues getting on the public policy agenda using Kingdon's key concepts.

Table 9.1 Phase 1: Initial moves towards pension policies

Problems	An ageing population and increasing reluctance on the part of employers to keep older workers
Politics	The emergence of democracy, a readiness to see poverty in old age as not the fault of the individual
Policies	Either ideas derived from insurance or more universal models of public assistance for the elderly
Policy entrepreneurs	Politicians on the Left; friendly society leaders recognising increased problems with voluntary initiatives
Windows of opportunity	Electoral shifts to the Left

Table 9.2 Phase 2: Pension policy consolidation

Problems	Poverty amongst those not in schemes; equity problems because of mixtures of different schemes; insolvency of some private schemes
Politics	Championing of universalist solutions by the political Left
Policies	Universal models; models involving public/private combinations
Policy entrepreneurs	Politicians of the Left; private companies eager to secure new business or protect existing business
Windows of opportunity	Electoral shifts to the Left; scandals about private schemes

The explanation given for the first phase in pension policy making (see Table 9.1) seems to offer a more political approach to agenda setting than there is in Kingdon's model. This seems to be dominant in historical accounts of the evolution of pension policies, though there are differences of view on the importance of the political Left (Ashford, 1986; Baldwin, 1990; Heclo, 1974). But the demographic aspect of the emergence of the problem has also been widely emphasised (Pampel and Williamson, 1989), and detailed accounts suggest the importance of policy entrepreneurs other than politicians (Baldwin, 1990; Gilbert, 1966). Furthermore, accounts of European developments make a great deal of the activities of one politician of the Right, Bismarck, who perceived an opportunity to tie the new industrial working class into the support of the state as the collector of their contributions and the guarantor of their pensions.

In the consolidation period (see Table 9.2) the divergences that are a key concern of modern comparative studies really emerged between those countries that adopted more or less universal public schemes (Sweden, Norway and Denmark, for example), those that developed a more divided version of the universalist approach (Germany and France, for example) and those that settled for provisions that were a mix of public and private (the UK and Australia, for example) (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The key explanatory variables were perhaps concerns about inconsistencies and a strong universalist drive from the Left of the political spectrum. But the emergence of a variety

Table 9.3 Phase 3: Pension cutting

Problems	Substantial increases in the elderly population; threats of insolvency for both public and private schemes
Politics	Championing of privatised solutions by the political Right
Policies	Cuts to promised entitlements; ways to increase prefunding
Policy entrepreneurs	Private pension providers: international organisations
Windows of opportunity	Electoral shifts to the Right; fiscal crises

of private pension initiatives meant that the Left faced a rival agenda, with the more sophisticated of the advocates of the private model recognising the case for partnership (inasmuch as they were reluctant to take on the provision of pensions for low-income workers) and the need to secure private schemes against scandals that could discredit them.

The interesting thing about the third phase (see Table 9.3) is not so much successful agenda setting as considerable difficulties in getting cuts on the agenda (see Box 4.5, p. 90 also Bonoli and Shinkawa, 2005; Ebbinghaus, 2011; Meyer *et al.*, 2007) because of the strength of the support coalition for the *status quo*. A peculiarity of any pension scheme is that it embodies promises made to people a long while before they reach the age of entitlement. Furthermore, if a scheme is contributory, which it is in most countries with large comprehensive schemes, then those promises for the future are being paid for in the present. The problem that prompts action is very often an expected future one rather than a current one. Policy entrepreneurs have to persuade politicians, whose time frames are short, that they should worry about long-term trends. Here the so-called 'demographic time bomb' is a good example of a socially defined problem exaggerating the implications of demographic change (see Hill, 2007, Chapter 6). Moreover, funded pension schemes, particularly if that funding is through investment in the stock market, themselves offer uncertain promises for the future. Nevertheless, a combination of the recognition of emergent fiscal problems by governments only too aware of difficulties in raising revenues, increased commitment to privatisation, and, perhaps above all, hard selling by private pension providers has succeeded in getting the case for changes onto the agenda.

This discussion has explored the issue in the group of countries that went into pension provision early in the twentieth century and consolidated schemes soon after the Second World War. The politics of pensions is very much more complicated in countries where pension provision or consolidation has only recently got onto the agenda. In these cases the conflict between the case for pension development and recognition of the strong case against open-ended and unfunded commitments made by bodies like the World Bank (1994) seriously complicates the agenda. We see here the influence of ideas, particularly the dominance of a belief in privatised market solutions to a problem like this.

In the UK, there has been a long conflict between a perspective which puts the main responsibility for pension provision on the state and an alternative view that, wherever possible, pensions should be provided by employers and

probably involve investment of contributions in the money market. We see then efforts to reconcile the conflicting concerns articulated by policy entrepreneurs:

- the high levels of current pensioner poverty;
- the future balance between the generations;
- the recognition that the favourable situation of many contributors to good private pension schemes is one that should be shared more widely;
- the desire of the financial market to sell pensions;
- a recognition that some marketised pensions may not be a good buy for their contributors in the long run.

A more detailed examination of the British case highlights (Hill, 2007, see also Ebbinghaus, 2011, on the wider European picture) the following aspects of an agenda setting process:

- the way in which current agendas emerge as consequences of past decisions;
- the incremental nature of change;
- the way alternative agendas come into conflict;
- the way those alternative agendas do not just arise out of conflicting interests and ideologies but also out of interrelated problems (in the UK case particularly the differences between the issues about current pensioner poverty and those about future comprehensive provisions).

Kingdon's model depicts the policy process as disorganised or haphazard. The pensions case discussed here suggests a need to question that. What has been suggested in the exploration of that issue is that it has been regularly on the agendas of many nations over a long period of time, that there has been a distinct 'politics' theme running through it and that there has been a comparative similarity, or at least a clustering, of ultimate policy responses. This politics has been analysed by a comparative study edited by Bonoli and Shinikawa (2005) that uses an approach to the analysis of that element in Kingdon's model which emphasises the significance of 'blame avoidance' by political actors (Weaver, 1986, p. 371). Hence it can be argued that the twin dilemmas for pension reform are that the funding of improvements will impose costs upon people who will not be immediate beneficiaries while the retrenchment necessary without those improvements 'forces tangible costs upon a limited number of people' (Shinikawa in Bonoli and Shinikawa, 2005, p. 165). The consequence is a search for approaches that yield benefits but hide costs.

There is a case for caution about the emphasis on *politics* in the case chosen here. Pension policy is perhaps a rather 'mainstream' policy issue, bound to get considerable attention and to appear regularly on policy agendas. Nevertheless, there is a need to ask whether Kingdon's American perspective leads him to underemphasise the factors that may give agenda setting a rather clearer shape, bringing it closer to the notion of a rational search for solutions to problems that he has criticised. The view that there may be differences in the way the agenda is set is explored by Cobb *et al.* (1976),

who distinguish between the 'outside initiation model' of liberal pluralist societies, the 'mobilisation model' of totalitarian regimes and the 'inside initiation model' where influential groups have easy access to decision makers. But that approach seems still to accept the relevance of the Kingdon model for open systems. It is important to consider whether the Kingdon model pays sufficient attention to institutional variations, in particular the different ways in which the political process is organised in different societies. Particular problems here are his treatment of the roles of politicians and his comments on the role of the media. The next section develops these points.

Kingdon's model makes no effort to weight the influence of the three streams of problems, policies and politics. They are broadly treated as equal. In analysing actual cases there are questions to be asked about this equality. The work discussed above on focussing events and on crises implies situations in which problems may be particularly important for the analysis, so in a sense does punctuated equilibrium theory. The examination of power inequalities (Chapter 2) obviously suggests that a portrait of policy advocacy which implies a very equal competition may be misleading. On this theme it is interesting to note an article by Pralle (2009) which develops a prescriptive argument on how those concerned about getting policies to combat global warming on the agenda can use Kingdon's model. In effect her concern is to help advocates stress problems and seize political opportunities.

The impact of mandates?

Perhaps the most important question about parity between the streams takes us back to the institutional context, and raises issues about the importance of politics. Essentially, the theory of representative democracy puts this first. It involves a model of the political process in which political parties compete to win elections, presenting manifestos between which the public may choose. There is then some expectation that the winners will implement the policies set out in their manifestos, on the basis that they have a 'mandate' for those policies. Of course, studies of electoral behaviour suggest that our voting choices are largely not determined in the rational way embodied in that model, and that fact may give politicians an excuse to disregard their commitments. However, despite this, the 'mandate' model operates as an important influence upon the formation of the policy agenda.

There are, then, clearly differences in the extent to which a coherent mandate can be expected. It is in the division that exists in the United States between President and Congress, and in the relatively loose programmatic bonds within parties, that we may find the basis for the relative underplaying of 'politics' in the Kingdon model. But within systems that are in formal terms more unified there may be another problem with identifying a coherent mandate: the fact that the government emerges not from the decisive victory of one party over another but from a compromise between more than one party. Notwithstanding this, it is interesting to note the continuing importance of the

notion of a mandate in the very divided system in the Netherlands. A crucial stage in negotiations about the formation of a government there involves the drawing up of a *regeneraaccord* embodying an agreed policy programme.

In the 2005 edition of this book this issue was explored through an examination of the impact of a mandate upon agenda setting in a situation in which strong effect of this kind could be expected, after a decisive victory by a single party in the 'first past the post' UK system. An examination was provided of the extent of mandate enactment by the Labour government headed by Tony Blair between the 1997 and 2001 elections. From that analysis it was argued that in this case an application of the Kingdon model would seem to underplay the politics dimension of agenda setting. However, the choice of the 1997 UK election probably exaggerates this since there was a dramatic shift of power (obviously influenced by the first past the post electoral system) with a new party, no members of which had had any involvement in government for 18 years, taking power. It is not very easy to analyse the two subsequent general elections (2001, 2005) in the same way. The Labour manifestos for those are vaguer on pledges and tend to emphasise achievements and unfinished business. One sees then the other feature of the UK system, the impact of a strong executive, so that the emergent policies owe more than those of 1997 to work done by politicians with the assistance of civil servants. Then the structuring may be seen as an outcome of 'team-work' involving both politicians and civil servants (a topic explored much more in the next chapter).

But then the 2010 UK election produced a new situation in respect of mandate setting because its outcome led to the formation of a coalition between the party with the largest number of Members of Parliament (the Conservatives) and the party which came third (the Liberal Democrats). Both parties had fought elections with mandates but to form a government a coalition agreement had to be reached involving compromise between those mandates. A key compromise was made in respect of electoral reform, on which the Liberal Democrats were strongly committed but the Conservatives hostile. The compromise involved a referendum where the parties campaigned on opposite sides; the Liberal Democrats lost. Soon after the formation of the government the Liberal Democrats also faced considerable difficulties when, in the face of their pledge to eliminate fees for higher education students, the new government proposed to increase them sharply. The coalition agreement had judged that issue but the determination of the Conservatives to take action severely embarrassed Liberal Democrat members of the new government. It seems to be the case that the coalition agreement is a 'mandate' that is difficult to interpret in the context of the everyday practice of government. This exploration of UK government mandates suggests that although much is made of these in the electoral process so that there appears to be a clear institutional framing, in fact an observation of elections since 1997 suggests considerable variations in the relevance of mandates:

1. A party which had been out of power for a long while fighting an election on a rather specific mandate (1997), following it then in respect of a range of the more straightforward domestic issues.

2. Two elections (2001, 2005) where the application of the mandate of the winning party was more about its own unfinished business.
3. An election resulting in the formation of a coalition in which, rather like the Dutch, mandates formed a basis for inter-party negotiations, yet the realities of power after rather hasty discussions limited their real impact.
4. Across the period decisions in matters of macro-economic policy (dealing with crises in particular) and foreign policy (interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya in particular) that cannot be realistically related back to mandates.

The impact of the media

Another issue here concerns the role of the media. Kingdon's book devotes a section to the media, within its consideration of policy entrepreneurs. However, Kingdon argues that the influence of the media on the agenda is less than might be expected, something he attributes partly to the way the media focuses attention on an issue for a while and then loses interest and moves onto something else. He argues that 'the media report what is going on in government . . . rather than having an independent effect *on* governmental agendas' (Kingdon, 1995, p. 59). He goes on to qualify that a little with three points about the media role:

- as communicators within policy communities;
- as magnifiers of movements that have occurred elsewhere;
- as agencies which some actors may particularly use.

Kingdon seems here to accept a portrayal of the media role which journalists themselves propagate: as the messengers rather than as the shapers of the message. Apart from repeating here the observation already made that Kingdon is of course only reporting on the United States, it is appropriate to challenge this view for its disregard of the second and third faces of power (see Chapter 2, pp. 30–5). This can be done with reference to all three of Kingdon's trilogy of problems, policy proposals and politics.

As far as 'problems' are concerned the media's limited and changing attention span is more relevant than Kingdon suggests. There is a very old joke that the journalist Claude Cockburn claimed to have won a competition at *The Times* for the dullest headline: 'Small earthquake in Chile: Not Many Dead'. It is very easy to find examples every day of news value judgements about whose accidents and disasters merit attention and whose do not. Deaths of American and British soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan get attention, more or less one by one, the much greater numbers of deaths of Iraqis and Afghans secure occasional references, often quoting challengeable estimates. When a natural disaster occurs in a foreign country the media tends to highlight cases where its own nationals are involved. In any case, reporting of the consequences

of these disasters tends to be heavy for a short time, after which they disappear from the media. Murders get more attention than accidents and some accidents (for example affecting planes as opposed to cars) get much more attention than others. Since this is not a book of media analysis the object here is neither to expose these issues fully, nor to examine the obvious journalistic defences of these cases of selective reporting. There are two points here:

- that when and how problems are reported affects the political attention they get;

- that media priorities are both their own priorities and reflections of what they expect public priorities to be, which can mean in both cases reinforcement of the dominant views (see Parsons, 1995, pp. 89–92 for some case study illustrations of this).

Turning then to policies, Kingdon's interpretation of the transmission role of the media is just too facile. The media tend to simplify the policies on the agenda and often highlight the simpler rather than the more complex ideas. This remark applies as much to the so-called serious press as to the mass circulation newspapers, and above all to television which works with communicable sound bites and dichotomies that can engender lively controversies. In relation to the example of pensions policy discussed above, issues about demographic change and about funding are often presented in very simplified (and often exaggerated) forms (Hill, 2007).

The general point illustrated in the last paragraph is that the media shape ideas on the policy agenda in a way that promotes some perspectives and excludes others (see McCombs and Shaw, 1972, for a classic influential presentation of this view). This is particularly the case in respect of economic ideas where conventional wisdom shapes political thinking and journalists are important for the packaging of that wisdom, given the busy lives and limited attention spans of the key political actors. In this sense notions about the relatively serious consequences of on the one hand rising inflation and on the other rising unemployment or about the need to limit public spending and avoid tax increases are as much the clichés of contemporary journalism as the shibboleths of contemporary politics.

It was suggested earlier that inasmuch as rational choice theory has been taken seriously it has had a certain self-fulfilling effect. Journalists surely have had a role in propagating the simplistic generalisations of rational choice theory (see Chapter 5) as universal truths contributing to:

- perceptions of politicians themselves as essentially self-interested actors;
- inculcating distrust of bureaucrats, as similarly self-interested;
- propagating through things like the 'median voter theorem' the view that political strategies that alienate 'middle England' (or wherever) are inherently risky.

Of course this is not agenda setting, but what it is doing is contributing to the constraints upon the agenda: discouraging innovation and political or administrative risk-taking.

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That brings us to the third item in Kingdon's trilogy: 'politics'. The media are themselves part of the political process, not just influences upon it. Accounts of contemporary politics draw attention to key figures amongst the ownership of the media, above all Rupert Murdoch and his family with their massive newspaper and television interests around the world. The views such figures take about what should or should not be on the political agenda are important, since they have the capacity to use the media to this end (see Kuhn cited in Seldon, 2007, on Blair's efforts to influence the media magnates). Again here the emphasis needs to be on the negative rather than the positive, counterbalancing Kingdon's stress on the pushing forward of ideas. While mass circulation newspapers may be wary about campaigning against a political party that is rising in popularity that does not contradict the proposition here about their influence on ideas (Dean, 2012).

But any account of the media *in politics* would be limited if it simply drew attention to the big figures with ownership powers. Journalists themselves need to be seen as members of an occupational community with views about what they should and should not do. Political journalists above all live their lives close to political elites, with privileged access to the powerful (which can be taken away if they are seen to go beyond the bounds of what the latter see as acceptable behaviour).

The qualifications to Kingdon's approach set out in this section and the previous one consist essentially, notwithstanding the apparent radicalism of his approach, of suggesting that his valuable account of the dynamics of agenda setting is still too wedded to a pluralist view of the political process in which interests clash in a relatively unstructured arena. This leads him to neglect the way in which political actors can control the agenda and above all to underplay the complex role of the media in the policy process.

CONCLUSIONS

While the starting point for any consideration of agenda setting needs to be the social processes that translate individual problems into social problems and then into political problems, efforts by policy analysts to theorise about agenda setting have their origins in efforts to prescribe how policy agendas should be set, using a 'rational' problem-solving model. But that model offers not so much an approach that helps us interpret how policy is actually made but rather an 'ideal type' against which more realistic models may be measured. The dominant approach to this realism is 'incrementalism', offered as an account of what is, but also as a more 'democratic' model for the messy world of pluralistic politics. However, that is both still probably too rational and does not address the issues about the circumstances in which more

(continued)

fragmented shifts in the agenda occur. Hence the analyst who really gets away from the prescriptive preoccupations of the rationalism/incrementalism debate is Kingdon.

Kingdon is not a dogmatic theorist. He speaks of himself as aiming to make progress 'in understanding . . . vague and imprecise phenomena', but finding that 'vision is still obscured' (1995, p. 208) and says that he is 'trying to weave a rich tapestry' (*ibid.*, p. 230). In this sense the fact that he gives no attention to agenda setting anywhere other than in the US federal government should not be held against him. Rather, he has given us an approach – we may even say a 'toolkit' – which we can use to explore agenda setting anywhere.

Embodied in Kingdon's notion that three streams – problems, policies and politics – mingle in the 'soup' is an interesting challenge to do two related things. These are to ask questions about the extent to which agenda setting may be stabilised in practice. The discussion above, conducted by means of the example of pensions policy, where in some respects stability or shaping comes from the long-run continuity of the 'problem', has suggested that 'politics' makes a difference to national responses. That leads us to look at the role of politics as a source of agenda shaping in societies that are less institutionally fragmented than the United States.

The three main approaches to the exploration of policy formulation – the rational model of decision making, incrementalism and Kingdon's agenda-setting model – are interesting for the way in which they reflect different policy process theories. The rational model has much in common with the traditional approach to representative government, seeing policy formulation as a systematic response to authoritatively set goals. While there is not much discussion of how these may be set, the presumption is that they emerge from the democratic political process. Incrementalism's links with pluralist thinking are very evident in the writings of Lindbloom. Furthermore, Lindbloom's shift in perspective through his career can be seen as a response to the challenge posed to pluralism by those who stressed power inequalities. Finally, the way in which Kingdon was influenced by March and Olsen's emphasis upon system unpredictability in an institutional context shows itself in his explicit use of the concept of the 'garbage can'. Furthermore, the challenge to Kingdon's model offered by evidence that systems may be more organised than he suggests emphasises institutional arrangements and the stability of some policy networks and communities.

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