The ‘Policy Cycle’, the ‘Garbage Can’ and Policy Coherence

The quest for an orderly and coherent approach to the design of an adequate process for the development of public policies - in the face of the considerable complexities involved - has a long and distinguished pedigree in the public policy literature. In order to understand complexity we need to simplify. Some of the models and frameworks to aid the understanding of public policy were summarised in the first unit.

When we deploy a framework, we are imposing a way of thinking about the world. We are creating an order out of that which may not have much coherence or order in itself. And we face the problem that any model or framework of public policy can only ever be a representation of a reality which cannot be proved or disproved in a final sense. Despite these dilemmas, policy-makers and theorists have doggedly persisted in the attempt to impose some order on the chaotic and endless interaction of political, policy and administrative worlds in their analysis of how and why public policies are made.

Broadly, public policy analysts have sought to develop orderly explanations and models of the policy making process by defining the roles of each player and their respective responsibilities, and to devise means by which policy ideas, proposals and actions are channelled along a recognised sequence. The idea of policy stages, steps and cycles to aid the understanding and structuring of policy development is a dominant theme in the field of public policy. This has been conceptualised in various ways in the literature.

Despite the fact that there has been a growing unease about understanding public policy-making as a rational process involving rational analysis, the policy-cycle or stagist approaches, as models which bring some order and coherence to the policy-making process, continue to influence the practice of policy making - at least as a process. Nevertheless, there is debate about the stagist and cycle approaches and there are alternative conceptions of policy making processes as much more chaotic and messy - even if that turbulence is still amenable to understanding and explanation.
Stagist or Policy-Cycle Approaches

As Parsons (1995, 78-9) outlines a variety of stages have been put forward to map the policy process. They are presented here in summary form:

Simon, H.A. *Administrative Behaviour* (1947)
- intelligence
- design
- choice

Lasswell, H.D. *The Decision Process* (1956)
- intelligence
- promotion
- prescription
- invocation
- application
- termination
- appraisal

Mack, R. *Planning and Uncertainty* (1971)
- deciding to decide: problem recognition
- formulating alternatives and criteria
- decision proper
- effectuation
- correction and supplementation

Rose, R. *Comparing Public Policy* (1973)
- public recognition of the need for a policy to exist
- how issues are placed on the agenda of public controversy
- how demands are advance
- the form of government involved in policy-making
- resources and constraints
- policy decisions

- what determines governmental choice
- choice in its context
- implementation
- outputs
- policy evaluation
- feedback

Jenkins, W. *Policy Analysis: A Political and organisational Perspective*
- initiation
- information
- consideration
- decision
- implementation
- evaluation
- termination

- deciding to decide (issue search or agenda setting)
- decided how to decide (issue filtration)
- issue definition
- forecasting
- setting objective and priorities
- options analysis
- policy implementation, monitoring and control
- evaluation and review
- policy maintenance, succession and termination
Stagist Policy-Making as Problem Solving

Howlett and Ramesh (1995) are among commentators who have equated policy-making with problem solving.

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<th>Phases of Problem Solving</th>
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Althaus, Bridgman and Davis’ Characterisation of the Policy Cycle

Althaus, Bridgman and Davis have elaborated the policy cycle idea in the Australian context as a series of steps in the following order:

1. **Identifying issues** - this occurs in two ways, through interest group representation (there is never a shortage of people telling government what to do) and/or the need for an overhaul of ineffective existing policy

2. **Policy analysis** - information, research, analysis and reflection are important to frame policy options

3. **Identification of policy instruments** - there is a need to consider the range of possible responses to the problem. Will it require new legislation, new programs or perhaps adjustment to internal operations of government?

4. **Consultation to test the strength of the analysis** - consultation is now generally presumed to take place both inside and outside government with both public and expert input. There is also coordination between agencies to ensure coherence of policy and in particular, consideration of the linkage between funding and the wider policy settings of government. This is necessary to resolve issues between agencies and institutions with a shared interest in the field

5. **Decision** - this is generally made through executive government and/or Cabinet
6. **Implementation** - in the stage the policy is given expression through legislation or programs

7. **Evaluation** - this stage is essential so government can gauge the effects of a policy and adjust or rethink the design of the policy

Source: Althaus, Bridgman & Davis, 2013, p. 38

**Strengths of the Policy Cycle Idea**

The policy cycle approach is regarded as a useful organising device in the following ways:

- It helps see policy making as a process rather than just a set of institutions - a process which transcends particular institutions or policy designs
- It disaggregates complex phenomena into manageable steps
It allows some synthesis of existing knowledge

It serves as a description of policy-making to assist in making sense of policy development

It is normative in suggesting and defending the view that a particular sequence is an appropriate way to approach the policy task

As Althaus, Bridgman and Davis point out, some order must arise from the endless interaction of political, policy and administrative worlds and the policy cycle is one system that assists in defining the roles and responsibilities of players and a number of necessary processes and procedures.

Limitations of the Policy Cycle Idea and the ‘Garbage Can’ Alternative

Others suggest that since the policy cycle is a normative model, there is a risk that it may impose too great a neatness on policy making which is renowned for complexity and discontinuity rather than the logical unfolding implied in most stagist and cycle thinking. Proponents of what is sometimes called the ‘Garbage Can’ model reject conventional policy cycle models that see policy development processes as rational and underpinned by the logic of problem solving. They posit a looser relationship between problems and the policy solutions offered by governments.

Rather than being about solving problems in appropriate and flexible ways, defenders of the ‘Garbage Can’ view see policies and programs based on them as the outcome of organisations having their own agendas and preferred policies, and looking for opportunities to implement them often without much regard to the appropriateness of those preferences. The success of particular policies has as much to do with chance as with rigorous analysis and evaluation. The sheer scale and complexity of public policy-making means that there is a limit to the number of problems or issues that can receive attention at any one time. The process by which this almost infinite array of policy options is narrowed is highly competitive and rarely rational.

The ‘garbage can’ is where, over time, policy ideas, problems and possible solutions are (metaphorically) dumped. This draws attention to the fact that the history of policy development and change is crucial to an understanding of what policies might emerge or be possible in the future. The overall result for defenders of the ‘garbage can’ view is to see policy development and implementation as a complex and often random combination of problems and solutions, including preferred solutions in search of a problem to which they might become attached.
Garbage Can Theory

Garbage Can Theory sees policy-making processes as:

- Uncertain, complex and fluid;
- Chaotic, random and frequently irrational;
- Involving numerous actors and competing interests; and
- Entailing a loose relationship between policy problems, policy analysis and policy solutions - ranging from unstable, fragmented policy environments to more stable and coherent ones.

As summarised by Tiernan and Burke who draw on John Kingdon’s work, Garbage Can accounts present policy agenda change as the product of the coupling of three otherwise independent ‘streams’: problems, policies and politics.

Problems

- The manner in which a problem is defined, articulated and brought to the attention of policy-makers will determine its likelihood of success.

Policies

- Ideas and policies are formulated, reviewed and reformulated as they float around in a ‘policy soup’
- There is no underlying logic to why some issues and ideas rise to the surface for attention and others do not
- Policy proposals may or may not be directed towards solving substantial problems
  - sometimes they will reflect an intellectual fad
  - at other times they will reflect the preferences and values of key influential people in politics, the bureaucracy or interest groups
Politics

- National mood, election results, the role and influence of interest groups and other organised political forces have an impact.
- There is influence by policy entrepreneurs who are willing to invest their resources, time, energy, reputation and money in the advocacy of an idea. They make linkages between the problems, policies and politics streams to ensure agenda change is achieved.

The ‘Garbage Can’ approach provides an explanation of agenda-setting in public policy-making which makes particular assumptions. For instance, it suggests that it is not just where policy ideas come from which is important but what makes them take hold and grow. The growth and sustainability of particular policy directions is a result of the characteristics of a particular policy arena - whether it is stable or unstable, or closely integrated or fragmented. Similarly, it is less important to identify the origins of a particular policy idea than to understand the complex interaction of factors that bring an issue to prominence on the policy agenda and make governments receptive to agenda change. This leads to the view that policy development and implementation probably needs to pay as much attention to the history, thought and interests shaping particular policy arenas - whether it be economic, health, education, defence, or foreign policy - as is does to generic all-encompassing policy models like those implied in the stagist and policy cycle notions.

Policy change in the ‘garbage can’ view contrasts starkly with rational decision-making approaches. The success of particular proposals has as much to with chance as with rigorous analysis and evaluation.

The Garbage Can Model Applied

Tiernan and Burke’s analysis of Australian housing policy usefully applies the ‘garbage can’ argument to illustrate the chaotic and often irrational nature of the policy process. Starting from an assumption that Australian housing policy is a more fragmented and unstable policy arena than others (for instance health and education) the authors identify some of the dimensions of instability and fragmentation:

- market instability
- fragmented views about housing policy issues - policy development is therefore vulnerable to fashions
- institutional fragmentation - federalism has led to conflict and confusion between the national and state governments
In their view, coupled with this fragmentation there has been a falling away of housing from the policy agenda for three reasons.

- Financial deregulation led to a lack of policy interest in financial aspects of home ownership
- The failure of state government schemes to support low-income home ownership
- The early 1990s recession and deflation pressures in housing markets displaced concerns about inflation-induced affordability problems from policy concern

In particular, generic managerial public sector reform dominated in Australia in the 1990s and housing agencies spent most of their time implementing administrative and organisational reforms rather than seeking program or policy solutions to issues in the field. As well, organisational change and a mix of managerialism and corporatisation saw housing identified as an area of human services in which housing assistance was linked with related social services.

For Tiernan and Burke, there was a fundamental disjunction between the understanding of Australian housing problems, and the policies and prescriptions to deal with them. Solutions were driven by preconceived analysis and problems based on market and corporate ideologies rather than a broader analysis of problems, options and possible solutions. In the government down-sizing environment of the time, any solution which proposed expansion of housing services did not survive the policy specification process. Economic rather than social indicators shaped the policy agendas of the time.

They conclude that Australian housing policy in the 1990s highlighted the wrong problems and pursued the wrong policies in an agenda for reform that gained an unstoppable momentum. The fragmented, chaotic and irrational nature of housing policy - and the dominance of generic policy and managerial thinking - precluded better, more appropriate decision-making and problem-solving. As a result, the authors suggest that conventional policy cycle models are unsuitable devices for describing and guiding agenda setting in this complex field.
Of course, the question is begged here about what a better, more appropriate policy agenda looks like. Can we posit a notion of ‘better’ even if we eschew strong ideas about rationality in policy development?

You might reflect on this question when reading the exchange between Everett and Bridgman & Davis.
References


