

Epilogue: Making Sense of Policy Fiascoes

Mark Bovens and Paul 't Hart

In our culture failure is anathema. We rarely hear about it, we never dwell on it and most of us do our best never to admit to it . . .

Sam B. Sitkin¹

Rethinking the Ubiquity of Failure: Consequences for Understanding Fiascoes

In drawing the conclusions of this study, we stand with Thorstein Veblen, who once wrote that “the outcome of any serious research can only be to make two questions grow where one question grew before.”² We hope he was right, since what this book has done mainly is to reframe existing questions about policy failure and generate new ones. It was the apparent increase in policy fiascoes in most Western democracies throughout the eighties that provided us with the initial puzzle of this study. Seven years later, what has this effort taught us about the apparent ubiquity of policy failure? Perhaps the main lesson to be learned is that the original question – why are there so many policy fiascoes nowadays? – is not very helpful. Especially if one takes a historical perspective, the answer to that question is straightforward and uninformative: moving through time, there is simply more and more policy to go wrong. In other words, because governments have spun an ever wider and more intricate web of policies, programs, and projects, the chances of major mishaps have increased. The increasing number of policy fiascoes thus

Source: *Understanding Policy Fiascoes* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), pp. 145–159.

becomes a matter of statistics. From this point of view, the only major bone of contention concerns the rate of this increase: is it proportional to the increasing scope of government activities, or does it rise exponentially, perhaps due to problems associated with “policy overstretch?”³

In our view, a more productive line of inquiry follows if one reframes the original question to read as: why have we become more inclined to understand public events and policy episodes as fiascoes? Why has societal tolerance for misfortune, unintended negative consequences of public policies, and bureaucratic failure decreased? How and why did fiascoes become prime-time news topics and political peak events? Whose agendas were served by this development? Our analysis suggests that the alleged ubiquity of failure is as much a product of social expectations and political ideology as it is due to substantive failures of public service-delivery. The expanding scope of public policy in the postwar era has generated a paradox of rising expectations: the more we became accustomed to a comprehensive and relatively successful welfare state, the more critical we became of it. Even if government was doing better, we were feeling worse about it. We became more sensitive to the unintended consequences of government intervention, such as the bureaucratization of public service delivery, the displacement rather than the resolution of social problems, and the escalating costs of many welfare state provisions.

Eventually, this latent discomfort became more articulate as a result of a paradigm shift in economic and political thought. Throughout the seventies and eighties, but particularly in the latter decade, we have come to look at government first and foremost from an essentially technocratic perspective, driven by an ideology of efficiency. Neoclassical economists and neoconservative political thinkers have succeeded in setting the terms of debate, highlighting individualistic cultural values at the expense of hierarchical and egalitarian perspectives. In many ways, the dominant normative frame for analyzing and judging government has been a “problem-solving” one (see chapter 5), where it had previously been viewed much more in terms of balancing competing values and institutional interaction. Consequently we have tended to judge quite a number of public policies on the basis of standards considerably different from the ones that prevailed at the time when they were conceived. Moreover, these new standards contained a definite bias against “big government” and in favor of market-based institutions for solving social problems. This has tended to cost government, the public sector, and the bureaucracy much of the benefit of the public doubt they once enjoyed in many Western countries. They have lost “diffuse support,” and, consequently, their actions (and non-actions) became a readily available object for finding fault.⁴

In other words, by adopting new ways of looking at and evaluating public policymaking, we have ourselves constructed a significant number of the fiascoes we subsequently “observed.” Red tape is no longer regarded as merely a nuisance, it has become an evil to be eradicated with every means

possible.⁵ Cases of government fraud, waste, and abuse are no longer viewed as incidents but as symptoms of a bigger pathology. Unintended negative effects of social programs are no longer taken for granted as problems to be remedied incrementally, but instead have become a sufficient cause for their abolition.⁶ Weber's disenchantment of society has now come to pervade one of its own driving forces: the rational system of social control vested in the public bureaucracy. Creeping disenchantment with the limits of bureaucratic rationality in public policymaking has produced an ideological swing that makes us less and less willing to give it a chance at all. The fact that politicians and bureaucrats have in many cases been reluctant to tone down their campaign pledges and institutional rhetoric to the new realities has only reinforced these tendencies.

The disenchantment of government has continued unabated at another level, that is, in our tolerance for fate and misfortune as significant forces shaping our lives and the society we live in. There is a paradox here. At one level, we have grown more disappointed with government as the great societal problem solver. At the same time, however, our expectations concerning a life free from acts of God, nature's capriciousness, and other random forces beyond institutional control have continued to rise. As a result, the tragic dimensions of public life, not so long ago still accepted as an important feature of statecraft and governance, have faded from both popular discourse about politics and from the evaluation designs of policy analysts. Since we no longer accept misfortune as a cause of social ills, someone has to be blamed for them. As we have seen in chapter 6, government has become an ever more readily available scapegoat.

Rethinking the Relativity of Failure: Consequences for Policy Analysis

Understanding policy fiascoes poses a tough challenge for policy analysts. We have spent a lot of time in this book documenting the philosophical, conceptual, normative, and ultimately political choices analysts face in moving through the four layers of fiasco analysis. Does this apparent relativity of failure mean that everything is in the eye of the beholder when it comes to understanding policy fiascoes? Is there no such thing as an empirical reality of policy failure? We are reluctant to adopt a fully relativist position. Some physical and symbolic manifestations of policy failure are so powerful as to allow for little if any debate about the question "is this really a fiasco?". This goes both for "instant" and "evolving" fiascoes, for example the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle and the massive increase in homelessness in major American cities throughout the eighties. One could find more cases like these where few analysts would dispute the catastrophic results of the policies pursued. Moreover, when they get around to debating some of these cases

they might even come to agree on which are the key factors that contributed to these negative outcomes.

Unfortunately perhaps, our analysis suggests that in the majority of cases this does not happen. It happens more often that analysts find themselves in the midst of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and politicization. In fact, what sets policy “fiascoes” apart as a special category of events is intense public and political arousal. This implies controversy in retrospection among stakeholders, media, outside observers, and policy analysts. Hence the crucial starting point for analysis is to determine who sees what and why when evaluating these episodes. There is very little one can do to isolate policy analysis from the politics of blaming that are inextricably wound up in the construction of policy fiascoes. The problem is felt by many working in this field, for example by students of comparative political scandals and public corruption:

What really distinguishes the scandalous act from the normally self-seeking is its blatant violation of community norms, of . . . the community's conscience collective. This may seem to make the definition of scandal to be as much in the eye of the beholder as is obscenity, and to raise some awful problems of determining community standards. Who would want to be forced to operationalize a definition of that?⁷

Should we, therefore, abandon the quest for a comparative understanding of the dynamics of controversial policy episodes? We think not. But it does require us to be quite specific about what this entails and what not.

In our view, the key challenge for policy analysis in this domain should not be how to save objectivity, validity, and reliability from the twin threats of epistemological relativism and political contestation. This project, we have shown, is doomed to fail. It can only lead to a kind of analytical self-deception: fiasco analysts perfunctory neglecting or “willing away” pivotal philosophical queries and social and political biases. In our view it may be more productive to ask two alternative questions. First, how can fiasco analysis maximize academic rigor without becoming politically irrelevant? Second, how can fiasco analysis be policy relevant without being used politically? The first question deals with the analytical dimension. It requires fiasco analysts to navigate between the Scylla of seemingly robust but irrelevant positivism and the Charybdis of politically astute but philosophically problematic relativism. The second question deals with the applied dimension. It alerts fiasco analysts to the politics of analysis that are such a prominent feature of constructing policy fiascoes and attempts to “learn” from them.

The approach to analyzing policy fiascoes advocated in this book should be viewed within the context of a broader repositioning of policy science that we feel is going on and appropriately so. At the base of this development lies the acceptance of the interpretivist claim that all knowledge about social affairs – including public policymaking – is based on limited information and

social constructions. If one does so, the aims and scope of policy evaluation need to be redefined away from current, predominantly positivist, and social-engineering oriented perspectives.⁸ In the alternative view that is currently coming to bloom, social science is taken to be a set of conventions aimed at the production and continuous adjustment of more or less systematically derived and verifiable knowledge. Policy science conceived of in this manner is merely one amongst other forms of sense-making, diagnosis, and debate.⁹ In this view, policy science does not produce insights that are inherently superior to all other forms of knowledge about policy and politics. Policy science should instead assume that: man is fallible; science is biased; value judgments are crucial; institutions embody values, colour perceptions, and generate biases; and both the substance and the process of policymaking evolve around political interaction. Befitting such a realist framework is the essentially incrementalist view that public policymaking's best bet is to devote the bulk of its efforts to the task of enabling society to avoid, move away from, and effectively respond to what, through pluralistic debate, it has come to recognize as important present and future ills.¹⁰ Policy analysis is supposed to be an integral part of this project, but not in the straightforward manner of science for policy. Instead, the key to policy science's unique contribution lies in its reflective potential. We agree with Majone that

It is not the task of analysts to resolve fundamental disagreements about evaluative criteria and standards of accountability; only the political process can do that. However, analysts can contribute to societal learning by refining the standards of appraisal and by encouraging a more sophisticated understanding of public policies than is possible from a single perspective.¹¹

This also goes for evaluating past policy episodes. Again we cite Majone:

The need today is less to develop "objective" measures of outcomes – the traditional aim of evaluation research – than to facilitate a wide-ranging dialogue among advocates of different criteria.¹²

Following the logic of this perhaps more modest perspective on the scope for "scientific" policy evaluation, we propose a set of basic, interrelated principles for fiasco analysis which encapsulate most of what we have said so far:

- *Inevitable subjectivity.* It is impossible to develop objectifiable indicators and tools for evaluating controversial policy episodes.
- *Normative pluralism.* In making sense of controversial policies, multiple and different types of norms and standards of evaluation will be deemed relevant by different groups of stakeholders. Within but certainly between different national or subnational political and administrative systems, important variations in value configurations may be found, without the

policy analyst being able to make an authoritative choice in favor of one or the other configuration.

- *A more explicit metatheoretical orientation.* In our view, a case study of a particular fiasco begins with the analyst reflecting upon and explicitizing his views on the ontology of the object of study. Based on that, he would adopt a particular epistemological position, that is, he makes clear what sort of knowledge about these events he seeks to generate, how this can be done, to what purpose, and subject to which constraints. He then elaborates his argument, matching his research methodology, data presentation, and conclusions to the epistemological frame adopted. In this way, analysts are more or less forced to face and explicitize the analytical biases and choices inherent to any piece of policy evaluation. In this way, their argument becomes more transparent and verifiable. Its scope and functions in relation to other analyses of the same set of events becomes easier to determine.
- *Taking context seriously.* It is important to view policy fiascoes and other complex policy ventures in their broader historical, ideological, and institutional context. In this context much of the rationale of the problem definitions, strategies, and actions of the policymakers in question can be found. At the same time, we have seen throughout this book that these contextual factors are also essential to reach an understanding of how the outcomes of policies are subsequently perceived and judged in the political system as a whole.
- *Institutionalized intersubjectivity.* This contextual sensitivity in fiasco analysis will be greatly facilitated if different analysts working on a particular episode are routinely induced to compare, and discuss their findings more explicitly than is presently the case. In doing so, they may, firstly, clarify the essential differences between their approaches and become more aware of how these premeditate their conclusions. In other words, they should sit down and communicate when they look, how they look, and what they see when they study the case in question. Secondly, they may attempt to consensually adapt their respective approaches, up to the point of exploring ways in which they might integrate their approaches. Ultimately, this may produce inter-subjectively supported interpretations, that presumably take into account a wider range of values and biases than each single analyst's original approach.

We do not advocate any sort of paradigmatic revolution in policy analysis. First, we do not consider it necessary. Second, scientific revolutions do not happen by design as much as some may want them to. Yet we are inclined to see merit in alternating epistemologies, with a bias towards interpretivism. In this book, we have shown that the predominantly positivist mode of theory formation in fiasco analysis has conduced to a proliferation of adhoc hypotheses and incompatible frameworks. Preferably, these were pitted against one another as if they were knights in a medieval tournament competing for

the hand of the fair lady called Truth. This has worked well in the sense of generating a great deal of “requisite variety,” collapsed here into four main types of analytical foci. But positivism has been much less successful in generating strategies on how to handle this variety. Since there are definite limits to what a positivist perspective on theory-building can achieve in the way of satisfactory explanations of fiasco episodes, policy analysts need to explore other routes to empirical analysis. In our view, an interpretive approach is well-suited to the features of fiasco analysis described in this book. For example, the interpretive analyst would find it unacceptable to simply “zoom in” on the activities of, say, William Casey and Oliver North during the months of the secret arms deliveries to Iran during the Reagan administration. To understand why they did what they did, as well as why they did it in particular ways foregoing other options, it is necessary to look at what sort of men they were and how their position and status within the Reagan foreign policy establishment were evolving. It is also important to determine how their earlier experiences influenced their definitions of the problem and their preference for a particular way of acting. Furthermore, a historical-institutional analysis may shed more light on the question how it became possible for such a small nucleus of officials to exclude important individuals and organizations in the political and bureaucratic arenas. In performing such an analysis, we may lose deductive rigor and parsimony but gain understanding of how the principal actors interpreted and reinterpreted the evolving situations confronting them, and the behavioral imperatives they derived from those interpretations. Given the importance and uniqueness of the events under study, this should be well worth the effort.

We do not claim the above set of principles for policy analysis provides easy answers to complex normative and epistemological questions. But they do force the analyst to approach the problem of policy fiascoes from multiple perspectives, to take seriously the social and political context in which policy analysis takes place, and to do all of this in a more or less systematic and verifiable manner.

This still leaves us with the problem of theoretical pluralism discussed at some length in chapter five. Much as though some might want it to, theoretical pluralism is not going to go away. It is deep rooted in the nature of the social science project: “Because the personal experiences and evaluative standards of investigators are bound to differ, the embeddedness of social science in value judgments, different personal sensibilities, and political ideology is impossible to avoid.”¹³ The question is whether we should be worried about this. From the perspective on policy analysis advocated here, pluralism at the level of philosophies of governance is not a major problem for policy analysis. On the contrary, it is a source of debate in political theory and normative discourse on public administration. What our approach calls for is more open debate between the various positions. The problem of multiplicity emerges primarily at the occasion of analyzing a concrete historical case. There, conceptual

and normative frames implicit in particular epistemologies, philosophies of governance, and cultural predispositions shape the methodology, substance, and conclusions of the analysis. At this level, too, the problem is not so much that these biases exist, but that they remain unrecognized and implicit. As Nelson observes in an essay in which he juxtaposes political, organizational, and scientific models of policy analysis:

In addition to their clumsy treatment of value and knowledge (a problem that seems to infect analysis generally), analysts within each of the traditions have had a tendency to combine tunnel vision with intellectual imperialism. . . . Members of the different traditions have had a tendency to be lulled by their imperialistic rhetoric. This has often led them to provide interpretations and prescriptions that the public, and the political apparatus, rightly have scoffed at.¹⁴

This is particularly sensitive in the context of debates about policies or programs that, at whatever stage of their development and for whatever reason, have become controversial. The multiple accounts of those episodes offered by different analysts may then easily become ammunition in the process of blaming and accountability, decreasing the likelihood of more dispassionate and ameliorative uses.

Talking not so much about policy analysts but about policy practitioners, Schon and Rein have captured the kind of program for policy analysis advocated here under the heading of “frame-reflectiveness.” This implies a willingness on the part of analysts to continuously reflect upon and reassess their own lenses for looking at the world. In addition, they need to make efforts to communicate with and understand analysts using a different set of assumptions.¹⁵ Absent such a reflective orientation, policy analysts may find that they and their conclusions are deemed irrelevant by key players in the political arena. Or they may find themselves set up unwittingly as hired guns in the politics of blaming. They ought to be neither.

Reflective policy analysts may strive for a position as a systematic, well-informed, thoughtful, and fair-minded group provider of inputs to the political process of argumentation, debate, maneuvering, and blaming that characterizes controversial policy episodes. In our view, their effectiveness could be enhanced significantly if they adopt a role conception that befits such a position: explicit about their own assumptions; meticulous in developing their arguments; sensitive to context; and striving to create institutional procedures for open and pluralistic debate. At the same time, since the political world of policy fiascoes in particular is unlikely to be supportive of such frame-reflectiveness, policy analysts need a considerable amount of political astuteness in assessing their own position in the field of forces. It doesn't help much if the analyst has a good story to tell but has nobody influential to listen to him. Hence it is important for analyst to make sure their arguments are heard by who they think are the right people at the right time, and in the right

way. This may affect both the substance and the presentation of the analyst's arguments: "Feasibility, rather than optimality, should be the main concern of policy analysts, and . . . they should be as preoccupied with political and institutional constraints as with technical and economic constraints."¹⁶

There is a certain paradox here: the policy analyst who is serious about his role as facilitator of reflection in policy practice, can only succeed if he also understands and utilizes the principles of governmental politics. He needs to be able to penetrate organizational defensiveness and political impulses to manipulate blame for failure. Finding ways to deal creatively with the sometimes opposing requirements of detached reflection and political realism is what the art and craft of policy analysis are all about.

Rethinking the Inevitability of Failure: Consequences for Policymaking

Reflecting many years later upon his experiences as first the celebrated visionary and later the notorious fired architect of the Sydney Opera House, Jørn Utzon observed that perhaps the greatest damage done by the controversy surrounding its construction had been the foregone opportunities for further large-scale architectural experimentation in Australia. The fact that the Sydney experience for many years was portrayed as a policy nightmare to be avoided at all costs, cast a long shadow in Australia. It promoted a distinct conservatism in design and risk aversion in construction management, which deprived the country of its emergent reputation as a venue for innovative architectural ventures. Utzon's observations are obviously biased by his personal involvement in the affair. It is remarkable nevertheless that the desire to avoid adventurous designs requiring new technologies and complex materials was indeed a crucial consideration of the panel selecting the winning design for Australia's New Parliament House, more than a decade after the controversy about the Opera House had reached its peak.¹⁷ Anything smacking of grandiosity in design was sure to elicit criticism, which came out clearly during the debates surrounding the construction of the new High Court building in Canberra some years before.¹⁸ It is also remarkable that the use of fast-track construction management techniques requiring synthetic organization structures has been eschewed for a long time in Australia's public building practices. Those projects where fast-tracking was used, such as the construction of the Westmead Hospital near Sydney, elicited considerable controversy. It took political sophistication, a slick public relations operation, and most of all the on-time delivery of the New Parliament House by the Parliament House Construction Authority (1979–1988) to break the hold of the dominant Opera House analogy that had cast a shadow over all these kinds of projects.

This example shows that the construction of policy fiascoes has a broader significance beyond the politics of blaming and exculpation that focus on the

events themselves. Because of their high visibility and drama, policy fiascoes tend to become important analogies for future policymakers, critics, and other stakeholders. If a proposed policy or program has become associated with a major past fiasco, it will have a hard time gaining political, bureaucratic, and communal acceptance. At the same time, it may serve as a powerful source of “don’ts” for those who propose to develop it. In other words, the ways in which policy fiascoes are constructed may have definite implications for future policymaking. To what extent can we uncover some of them on the basis of this study? What does it teach us about the prospects and possibilities for preventing policy fiascoes? Given the current, essentially skeptical if not hostile ideological climate, are policymakers not doomed to be labelled as failures irrespective of what they do and achieve?

This study has focused on public and academic debates about policymaking rather than on policymaking itself. It would therefore be inappropriate and presumptuous to end it with a detailed set of policy recommendations, let alone an operational guide on how to avoid policy fiascoes. We can, however, offer a few preliminary observations. To begin with, we think it is important that policymakers look for ways to come to grips with the contextual, contingent, and occasionally volatile nature of the social and political standards for evaluating public policy. One way to do so might be to engage in forms of context-auditing: To continuously examine what policy predicaments are identified by key players, fora, and institutions in the community. What kinds of issues come to be framed as problems? What kinds of social expectations with regard to the government’s handling of these problems emerge? Mary Douglas has pointed out that standards of accountability are continuously being renegotiated in a community, whether policymakers like it or not. This means that certain meanings attached to policies change as policies are enacted. They change in ways that policymakers may not always be able to control, but that they can certainly try to anticipate by engaging in contextual auditing. One important example that illustrates the need for such cultural auditing by policymakers would be the notion of risk. Douglas suggests in most Western societies today, a more expansive conception of personal and societal risk has taken hold. This, in turn, has played an important role in evaluating the behavior of institutions. She observes that

[A] debate about accountability . . . is carried out incessantly in any community. This dialogue, the cultural process itself, is a contest to muster support for one kind of action rather than another. Decisions to invest in more technology, or less, are the result of the cultural dialogue. Decisions to invade, to refuse immigration, to license, to withhold consent, all these responses to claims need support from institutions of law and justice. The cultural dialogue is therefore best studied in its forensic moments. The concept of risk emerges as a key idea for modern times because of its uses as a forensic resource. . . . The language of risk is reserved as a specialized lexical register for political talk about the undesirable outcomes. . . . The

charge of risk is a stick to beat authority, to make lazy bureaucrats sit up, to exact restitution for victims.¹⁹

Context-auditing may help policymakers anticipate the drift of such social and political developments. These kinds of auditing practices may become even more important if one takes into account the transnationalization of many policies in both Western Europe and North America with respect to, amongst others, international trade, the environment, and telecommunications. More and more, policymakers will find themselves dealing with and judged by people and institutions harboring cultural predispositions and philosophies of governance that differ markedly from their own. Context-auditing requires policymakers to engage in thought experiments. By shifting time horizons, spatial perspectives, and alternating cultural archetypes, they may continuously probe how a certain proposal, policy, or action on their part might be interpreted by different stakeholders and fora. This may help them to anticipate lines of critique they otherwise would not take into account.

Institutionalized forms of context-auditing may serve to upgrade the quality of feasibility analysis during the policy design process. Their impact would be even further increased if they are embedded in a more comprehensive logic of discursive or communicative policy design. The analysis of this study suggests there is much value in Schon and Rein's view of policy design rationality as embedded in ongoing conversations between designers and other stakeholders.²⁰ There is a case to be made that many policy fiascoes are a form post-hoc "policy backtalk" by stakeholders and communities who found that policies inimical to some of their deep-rooted myths, beliefs, and values had been imposed on them. In this view, policies that solicit opposition and controversy that is left unarticulated or ignored during policy design, will eventually come to haunt their makers during implementation. Policy fiascoes are nothing more and nothing less than a manifestation of the "rhetoric of reaction" generated by unilateral strategies of policymaking.²¹ Fiascoes of this kind might be prevented when the design process is opened up to become more iterative, evolving around continuous dialogue about what the problems to be solved look like and what strategies for resolution solicit the necessary agreement. In this logic of policy design, developing and abiding by more communicative strategies for conflict recognition and conflict resolution become an important challenge for public policymakers.

Coda: From Fiascoes to Successes?

During our research for this study we have been asked many times why we were writing a book about failure rather than about success in public policymaking. Surely that would have resulted in a more "upbeat" and practically useful contribution? It would also have been timely, since it seems the field is turning

away from telling policymakers what goes wrong. Policy analysts have started telling the public that policymakers and bureaucrats are doing a much better job than they usually get credit for.²² Others have followed in the footsteps of private sector management gurus. They have collected examples of excellence, innovation, and success in government, and have built their own recipes for “reinventing government” and “exemplary public management.”²³

We have two rejoinders. Firstly, we think there is a plausible case to be made that at least as much can be learned from studying failure than from studying success. In a culture that takes political order, social welfare, and a high level of public service delivery for granted, failure is much more conspicuous than success. It tends to provide a much stronger institutional impetus to find out what happened and why. It also tends to promote organizational and political forces that advocate change. In contrast, the institutional reinforcement and routinization of successful modes of policymaking have been known to breed future failures through neglect of the differences between past and current situations in which policymaking takes place.²⁴

If one succeeds in stripping away or containing the politics of blaming, a controlled strategy of trial and error seems to produce more significant policy learning than reinforcement and imitation of successes.²⁵ Besides, as Shiels argues “we forget that the greatest success is often the absence of failure. The disaster averted is rarely recognized as such. Small, prudent decisions that avoid a Chernobyl or a space shuttle tragedy almost by definition cannot be measured.”²⁶ The challenge then becomes not only how to bring failures to light, but also how to put them to productive use. As we have argued above, this is both an analytical and a political project.

Secondly and perhaps more importantly, to some extent we have in fact developed a framework for studying policy success, but not quite along the lines of the new apostles of success and excellence in government. In our view, most of what we have written about the dynamics of policy failure as a social and political construct also applies to policy success. Success too is a contextual phenomenon. It is a function of standards and philosophies of government that are variable across time and culture, malleable by political argument and institutional impression management. *Mutatis mutandis*, the analytical scheme of this book about failure can be converted into its mirror image: a set of questions about the construction of policy successes. The emergent literature on success, excellence, and best practices could be analyzed for biases in assessing outcomes, identifying the agents of success (rephrased as “chance or competence?”), explaining their behavior, and evaluating it. The same logic could be applied to scrutinize individual cases of policy success.

Analyzing success in this way would force one to go beyond learning by imitation. The analyst would concentrate instead on critically probing what people mean when they claim this or that policy is a major success, or when a particular agency or administrator is portrayed as exemplary. The upshot of this kind of success analysis will probably be a call for caution in embracing

the checklists and strategies of the current gurus of public sector success. Like the failure-oriented generation of analysts preceding them, they and their ideas tell us at least as much about the cultural and political context in which they are set, as they do about policy success. This should be taken into account when absorbing their lessons. To be really sure if these are indeed the main conclusions when our framework is applied to understanding policy success, somebody should try and write a book about it. We just might, one day.

Notes

1. S.B. Sitkin, Learning through failure: The strategy of small losses, in: B.M. Staw, L. Cummings (eds.), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 14, Greenwich: JAI Press 1992, p. 232.
2. T. Veblen, *The place of science in modern civilization*, New York: Russell and Russell 1961, as quoted by C.E. Lindblom, D.K. Cohen, *Usable knowledge: Social science and social problem solving*, New Haven: Yale UP 1977, p. 33.
3. Analogous to Kennedy's notion of "imperial overstretch" in analyzing the breakdown of hegemonic powers in the world system, see P. Kennedy, *The rise and fall of great powers: Economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York: Random House 1987.
4. Compare D. Easton, *A systems analysis of political life*, New York: Wiley 1965.
5. C. Goodsell, *The case for bureaucracy: A public administration polemic*, Chatham: Chatham House 1985.
6. Compare, for example, C. Murray, *Losing ground*, New York: Basic Books 1984.
7. J. Logue, Appreciating scandal as a political art form, or, making an intellectual virtue of a political vice, in: A.S. Markovits and M. Silverstein (eds.), *The politics of scandal: Power and porcess in liberal democracies*, New York: Holmes and Maier 1988, p. 258.
8. Compare H.D. Lasswell and D. Lerner (eds.), *The policy sciences*, Stanford: Stanford UP 1951, H.D. Lasswell, *A pre-view of policy sciences*, New York: Elsevier 1971, and Y. Dror, *Design for policy sciences*, New York: Elsevier 1971 to F. Fischer, *Politics, values and public policy: The problem of methodology*, Boulder: Westview 1980 and G. Majone, *Evidence, argument and persuasion in the policy process*, New Haven: Yale UP 1989. For a useful critique, see P. DeLeon, Reinventing the policy sciences: three steps back to the future, *Policy Sciences*, 27, 1994, 77–95.
9. See J.A. Throgmorton, The rhetorics of policy analysis, *Policy Sciences*, 24, 1991, 153–179.
10. We reject the idea that this role conception implies a conservative view of politics and policymaking: identifying and combatting ills may very well require radical breakthroughs and non-incremental policies. Compare Y. Dror, *Policymaking under adversity*, New Brunswick: Transaction 1986, who uses similar premises.
11. Majone (1989), *op. cit.*, p. 182.
12. Majone (1989), *op. cit.*, p. 183; compare also Throgmorton (1991), *op. cit.*
13. J.C. Alexander, P. Colomy, Traditions and competition: Preface to a postpositivist approach to knowledge cumulation, in: G. Ritzer (ed.), *Metatheorizing*, London: Sage 1992, pp. 32–33.
14. R.R. Nelson, *The moon and the ghetto*, New York: Norton 1977, p. 19.
15. D. Schon, M. Rein, *Reframing: Toward the resolution of intractable policy controversies*, New York: Basic Books 1994.
16. Majone (1989), *op. cit.*, p. 77.

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17. Parliament House Construction Authority, *Project Parliament: Constructing a new parliament house*, Canberra: Government Printing Office 1989.
18. A. Kouzmin, The High Court: The politics of constructing the Court, *Legal Service Bulletin*, 5 (1980): 113–171.
19. M. Douglas, *Risk and blame: Essays in cultural theory*, London: Routledge 1992, p. 24.
20. Schon and Rein (1994), *op. cit.*
21. Borrowing Hirschman's wonderful title: A.O. Hirschman *The rhetoric of reaction: Perversity, futility, jeopardy*, Cambridge: Belknap Harvard UP 1991.
22. Goodsell (1985), *op. cit.* The same can be found in our own country, for example, in A.B. Ringeling, *Het imago van de overheld*, Den Haag: Vuga 1993.
23. Some examples out of a growing stream include D. Osborne and T. Gaebler, *Reinventing government: How the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector*, New York: Plume Books 1993; T.L. Cooper, *Exemplary public administrators*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1992; R.B. Denhardt, *The pursuit of significance: Strategies for managerial success in public organizations*, Belmont: Wadsworth 1993.
24. Sitkin (1992), *op. cit.*, pp. 234–236; compare also R. Neustadt, E.R. May, *Thinking in time: The uses of history for policymakers*, New York: Free Press 1986.
25. Sitkin (1992), *op. cit.*; see also K.S. Cameron, The effectiveness of ineffectiveness, in: B.M. Staw (ed.), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 6, Greenwich: JAI Press 1984, p. 235–285. Of course we are aware that the “if” in this sentence is crucial.
26. F.L. Shiels, *Preventable disasters: Why governments fail*, Savage: Rowman and Littlefield 1991, p. 190.