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Multiple Theories in Public Policy: How do they Inform Policymaking in the UK?

Abstract

Landmark studies in the discipline argue that there is considerable value to the use of multiple theories in the study of public policy. In a previous paper (Cairney, 2009a) I explored the various ways in which theories – regarding bounded rationality and incrementalism, punctuated equilibrium, the advocacy coalition framework, multiple streams analysis, policy transfer and the role of ideas - could be combined. To reflect the concerns of the panel, this paper considers the extent to which multiple theories can inform the issue of UK exceptionalism. The question of UK difference or exceptionalism is a common theme in other papers in this panel. This paper focuses primarily on what theories of public policy tell us about the extent to which the UK experience is generalisable or comparable to other political systems. In broader terms, it assesses the extent to which the issues raised by theories of public policy are specific to, or transcend, the boundaries of political systems.

Introduction

The student of comparative public policy may be faced with a confusing dilemma. On the one hand, a key tenet of public policy analysis is that the outcomes of policy processes vary markedly by policy area, policy issue, time, territory and type of political system. On the other, a central feature of many studies of public policy is that the same basic processes (and perhaps policy outcomes) can be found in political systems that appear to be different. Of course, taken together, these statements needn't be too problematic. Rather, we may conclude that although we *might* identify differences in policy processes and outcomes in two different territories, we should not *assume* that they exist. Further, we should consider the possibility that such differences are small when compared to other factors such as the differences between policy issues and over time (although how we would weight them is another matter). This is a concern that may be felt particularly by students of British public policy who are told that the UK is somehow different. Since this vague reference to an assumption of exceptionalism could easily come to resemble a strawman discussion, I focus in particular on one caricature of the UK as a political system expounded most famously by Lijphart (1999): the UK's majoritarian system is almost the polar opposite of the consensus democracies to be found in many Nordic countries. This contrasts with the argument in Richardson's (1982) edited volume that the UK shares a common policy style with its consensus democracy counterparts.

The argument of the latter is based on a movement from formal institutional analysis and the assumption of difference towards a consideration of how public policy really works in practice (just as Richardson and Jordan, 1979 shifted the focus from parliamentary government towards policy communities). The aim of this paper is to extend this debate to theories of public policy. It assesses the extent to which theories of public policy (a) identify common concerns which span political systems and/ or (b) apply in different ways to different political systems. First, it outlines the terms of debate between Lijphart on the one hand and Jordan and Richardson on the other. Second, it examines the relevance of rational choice and 'new institutionalism' accounts of public policy. Third, it considers the role and transfer of ideas. Fourth, it examines the issue of bounded rationality and incrementalism. Finally, it makes brief mention of complexity theory. In each case, the paper examines specifically the extent to which the UK is exceptional or not. It suggests that the same basic theme – regarding the need to identify both institutional differences and process-based similarities – flows throughout the literature.

UK Majoritarian Exceptionalism versus the European (and Devolved) Policy Style

The term 'policy style' refers to the way that governments make and implement policy (Richardson, 1982: 2). Our concern is how best to characterise the British policy style: with reference to a 'majoritarian' government that exploits the centralisation of power to impose policy decisions without consultation, or to the diffusion of power across policy sectors and consensual relationships between groups and government? Lijphart (1999) sets up a simple distinction between policy styles in countries which use plurality and proportional electoral systems: the former exaggerates governing majorities, produces a concentration of power at the centre and encourages majoritarian, top-down government; the latter diffuses power and encourages the formation of coalitions and the pursuit of consensus. The majoritarian narrative suggests that policy styles flow from electoral systems and the distribution of power. Under proportional systems, power is dispersed across parties, encouraging the formation of coalitions based on common aims. This spirit of 'inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise' extends to the relationships between group and government, with groups more likely to cooperate with each other and governments more willing to form corporatist alliances (Lijphart, 1999: 2-3). In contrast, the plurality system exaggerates governing majorities; control of the legislature is held by a single party and power is concentrated within government. This asymmetry of power extends to the group-government arena, with groups more likely to compete with each other and governments more likely to impose policy from the top down.

Richardson *et al.* (1982) argue that different political systems produce similar policy styles. Most (Western European)ⁱ countries share a common 'standard operating procedure' based on consultation and the need to seek consensus. Political systems are broken down into policy sectors, with power spread across government and shared with interest groups. The 'logic of consultation' often produces stable arrangements within policy communities or close-knit policy networks (Jordan and Maloney, 1997). Richardson (1982) highlights a strong tendency for the emergence of a common, 'European policy style'. Although the political structures and electoral systems of each country vary, they share a 'standard operating procedure' based on two factors: an

incremental approach to policy (which suggests that radical departures from policy decisions negotiated in the past are rare) and an attempt to reach consensus with interest groups rather than impose decisions. The logic underpinning 'bureaucratic accommodation' of the most affected interests is strong since it encourages group ownership of policy and maximises governmental knowledge of possible problems. Further, the size of the state and scope for 'overload' necessitates breaking policy down into more manageable sectors and sub-sectors which are less subject to top-down control. Ministers and senior civil servants devolve the bulk of decision-making to less senior officials who consult with groups and exchange access for resources such as expertise.

This alternative picture (although perhaps it is now mainstream?) produces the call for more evidence on, rather than assumptions about, the British policy style. This became particularly important during a Thatcher era that was widely assumed to be marked by conviction politics (fostered by a majoritarian system), the rejection of consultation and the imposition of policy (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992: 8). Subsequent debates on the nature of consultation demonstrated that the British policy style was complex and varied over time, sector and issue. Although consultation appeared to be rejected at a ministerial level, it was often merely displaced to other parts of the government machine (Cairney, 2002). There were still close relationships between groups and government and a 'top-down' process only accounted for a small proportion of the 'British style'. These points were rediscovered in the literature that critiques discussions of Blair's 'Presidentialism' (see Bevir and Rhodes, 2006) and, in particular, Kriesi, Adam and Jochum's (2006: 357-8) study which suggests that UK policy networks do not live up to their majoritarian reputation: 'British policy networks turned out to be quite fragmented, resembling more closely those expected for consensus than for majoritarian democracies ... This implies that future research should no longer aim at national level generalizations about power configurations and policy processes'.

These debates took on a further relevance in the lead up to devolution in the UK. The majoritarian image of the UK government style influenced narratives of 'new politics' in Scotland and Wales with, for example, the hope that the new Scottish Parliament would depart from the politics of 'old Westminster' (Scottish Constitutional Convention, 1995). This included plans very much in the Lijphart mould: a proportional electoral system, to share power between parties and encourage coalition building, and the widening of participation with groups to foster cooperation and resist the temptation to internalise policy formulation (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 13). The broad-picture evidence on this new comparator is very similar to the UK/ other European countries comparison. On the one hand, there is evidence that devolution opened up the consultation process for pressure participants, with groups reporting high levels of satisfaction when engaging with government (Cairney, 2008; Keating *et al.*, 2009). The process is more 'open and consultative' and groups point to the ease of access, with civil servants (and often ministers) a 'phone call away' (see McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 236). On the other, there is evidence to suggest that similar processes still operate in England; a similar logic of consultation still exists across the UK (Cairney, 2008). This contrasting picture is reinforced if we analyse specific case studies. For example, the process associated with the UK Mental Health Bill from the late 1990s reveals the caricature of top-down UK

government policy imposition (albeit resisted for ten years by interest groups) and contrasts markedly with a consensual style in Scotland. Yet, further investigation effectively reveals that a series of factors had to be in place (perhaps like the coming together of streams in Kingdon's analysis) to cause what is really a departure from the 'normal' style. In the absence of these factors, policymaking returned to the normal style which was very similar to that found in Scotland (Cairney, 2009b).

Overall, the policy communities approach suggests that we cannot read off behaviour simply from formal institutions. Indeed, it has now become associated with an alternative form of institutionalism - 'network institutionalism' - that vies for our attention along with the other 8 variants (Lowndes, 2010: 65; Jordan, 1990). So we now have the rather confusing prospect of new institutionalism telling us both that the UK is similar and different to its peers.

Rational Choice and New Institutionalism

This duality is demonstrated well by rational choice institutionalism. At face value, rational choice theory seems to offer a universal research agenda which transcends national boundaries. It employs 'methodological individualism' or a commitment to explain socio-political outcomes as the aggregation of the decisions of individuals (for a discussion of the various ways in which this is interpreted see Dowding, 1991: 10). The basic aim is to establish how many, or what proportion of, political outcomes one can explain with reference to the choices of individuals under particular conditions. In turn, a simplifying assumption is that individuals attempt to maximise their utility or the satisfaction they gain from fulfilling their preferences. Individuals act according to their preferences and their beliefs regarding how best to fulfil them (and the probability that a particular preference will be fulfilled by a particular act). A further simplifying assumption regards the knowledge and cognitive abilities of instrumentally rational individuals. For example, many models assume that individuals have the ability to rank their preferences consistently and in order of importance, while some assume for the sake of simplicity that individuals have the ability to consider all of the options available to them before making a decision.

Rational choice highlights two collective action problems relevant to public policy. The first relates to the potential for choices made by individuals to have an adverse societal effect when there is an absence of trust, obligation or other incentives to cooperate. The rather counter-intuitive result is that the aggregate level of utility for a group of individuals and each individual within it may be lower if individuals pursue their own narrow self-interest. The second relates to policy solutions. The implication is that if private individuals pursue their own interests then so too will individuals in the public sector. For example, the civil servants employed to implement public policies for the collective good may in fact seek to shape government departments and secure better working conditions, while policymakers may garner support from interest groups by promising them privileged lobbying positions rather than spend their time solving collective problems (Dunleavy, 1991; Tullock, 1967). Rational choice also explores the considerable potential for instability related: (a) to the absence of an adequate rule to aggregate individual preferences into social preferences; and therefore (b) 'cycling' or

intransitive electoral results and policy decisions to which there may always be ‘majority-preferred alternatives’ (Riker, 1982; Hindmoor, 2006a: 87; Ward, 2002: 66).

For our purposes, the point is that these issues are not yet country-specific. I say ‘not yet’ because this may change when we consider rational choice institutionalism, a branch of the literature dedicated to the study of how rules and payoffs to individual action influence the preferences of individuals. It may be that the rules governing behaviour in the UK are different and therefore the study of rational choice is different. The most obvious manifestation of this is that in a two-party plurality system we may focus on the median voter theorem while under PR our attention shifts to the probability of minority and coalition governments. Yet, just as there are many types of institutionalism, so too are there many different types of rules that influence behaviour. Further, while some rules will be more important than others, their rank-order is not self-evident. In particular, the waters are muddied by Shepsle’s (2006: 24-5) distinction between the rules as ‘exogenous constraints’ (such as electoral systems which provide rules for when and how to vote and therefore influence what the results will be) and the rules provided by the players themselves: ‘they are simply the ways in which the players want to play’. This opens the door for a discussion of the ‘equilibrium ways of doing things’ (2006: 24-5), such as when ministers generally devolve decision-making to policy networks. This supplements a focus on the informal ‘rules of the game’ associated with particular networks (regarding, for example, the desire to resolve issues within networks rather than publicising the issue to seek change elsewhere). The point is that these informal rules, common to political systems, may be more important predictors of policy processes than the formal.

The same can be said for historical institutionalism. Key texts highlight the need to avoid creating the impression that ‘political outcomes can simply be “read off” the institutional configuration’ and that ‘they explain different policy outcomes in different countries with reference to their respective (stable) institutional configurations’ (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992: 14). While the authors’ main worry is that this creates the impression of ‘institutional determinism’, another is that too much is taken for granted about which institutions have the most explanatory power. While studies based on historical institutionalism may highlight very context-specific explanations for events, we do not know for sure which contexts are the most important. This leaves open the possibility that the most important institutions in each political system are those which relate to networks; that although many countries took different paths on issues such as the nature of the welfare state, they engaged in very similar policy processes to do so. Indeed, the expansion of the state could represent a common ‘critical juncture’ for many political systems since it produced the logic of policy networks arrangements and consultation. Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 10) link the attractiveness of historical institutionalism to ‘the theoretical leverage it has provided for understanding policy continuities over time within countries and policy variation across countries’. In the context of a focus on policy communities, and our discussion of the role of ideas below, it may be that we identify policy style *continuities* across countries and perhaps variations rather than continuity over time within countries (following instances of punctuated equilibria).

The Role and Transfer of Ideas

Discussions of the role of ideas in the mainstream public policy literature identify what generally appear to be universal themes (despite, or because of, the fact that many are US studies based on the US system). The main theme is that, although metaphors are often used to describe the profound effect of ideas as independent variables they are also accompanied by discussions about how ideas are promoted and accepted within political systems.

An example of the former is Richardson's (2000: 1019) study of the breakdown of closed policy communities in Western Europe from the 1980s, which uses the analogy of viruses to describe the devastating effect that ideas can have on the policy process: 'Our resort to the virus analogy is meant to convey the importance of exogenously generated ideas as a shock to both existing institutional arrangements and the actors that benefit from them'. The preferences of actors, such as the public, are changed by ideas and knowledge which reside in the political community in much the same way that 'viruses present in the atmosphere we breathe'. Similarly, 'exogenous changes in policy fashion, ideas or policy frames' cause major changes to previously stable policy communities: 'New ideas have a virus-like quality and have an ability to disrupt existing policy systems, power relationships and policies' (see also Kingdon, 1984: 18).ⁱⁱ Extending the analogy to viruses such as SARS, policy viruses often spread through international travel, with stakeholders and decision makers increasingly able to meet their international counterparts and 'bring new ideas and policy frames back home' (Richardson, 2000: 1018). When viruses infect the policy process, they set the agenda for policy making and limit the scope of public debate (2000: 1018-9). If this new agenda conflicts with the old, then policy communities become unbalanced and may break down. While this presents ideas as devastating, this may actually refer to the introduction of knowledge which now seems innocuous and which we take for granted (such as the effects of smoking, diet and exhaust fumes on health – 2000: 1020). Yet, the effect of new knowledge can be profound, particularly when it spreads across a range of countries to produce major policy transfers (2000: 1020; chapter 12).

An example of the latter is Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) argument that the ability of some ideas to 'catch fire' is unusual. Our focus moves from the power of the ideas themselves to their successful *promotion* within the political system. Problem definition is crucial since it determines the level of attention and the nature of government response. Since decision makers, the media and the public all have limited resources (time, knowledge, attention) they cannot deal with the full range policy problems. So, they ignore most and promote few to the top of their agenda. This explains the existence of policy communities and monopolies. Issues are framed as humdrum and/ or technical and this limits the number of participants who can claim a legitimate role. Those excluded from communities have an interest in challenging this image. The role of knowledge and new evidence becomes crucial to divert attention to other aspects of the same problem. If a new and competing image is stifled by policy communities, then groups pursue 'aggressive venue-shopping' to seek influential and receptive audiences elsewhere (the courts, other types of government, the media, and the public). In *some* cases this is successful and we witness a shift from negative to positive feedback (Jones

and Baumgartner, 2005).ⁱⁱⁱ Periods of negative feedback are defined by limited government attention; policymakers will ignore or be resistant to new information gathered from the experience of other countries. In periods of positive feedback, those ideas may be given disproportionate attention by policymakers focussed acutely on one issue at the expense of most others. Given the limited attention spans of government, the consequence of intense levels of attention to one idea (which often produce policy punctuations) is that most ideas with the potential to destabilise existing policy arrangements are ignored (Cairney, 2009; 2010).

Punctuated equilibrium has much in common with Hall's (1993) discussion of the ability of ideas to *cause* or *inhibit* first, second and third order changes in policy.^{iv} First order change is incremental, with current policy based on the lessons of past decisions. It refers to a change in policy instrument settings while maintaining the instruments themselves and the government's overall goals. Policy learning is internalised, with civil servants and experts resisting pressure from most ministers and interest groups. Second order change is also based on adapting to past experience while maintaining overall goals, but with more wholesale changes to policy instruments. While outside interests are more involved, their views are still used by officials to promote changes sanctioned from within. Third order change refers to a radical, not incremental, shift in policy - involving changes to the 'hierarchy of goals behind policy'. This is rare and can be compared to Kuhn's (1970) 'paradigm shift':

Policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing ... this framework is embedded in the very terminology through which policymakers communicate about their work, and it is influential precisely because so much of it is taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny (Hall, 1993: 279).

Third order change requires a major departure from the way that policymakers would normally think and act. It follows significant policy failures which command the attention of the wider political arena, call into question current thinking and undermine its advocates. This produces a shift of power within government, with new governments taking over and introducing radically different policies or existing policymakers rejecting the advice of one set of experts in favour of another. In other words, those closest to the existing paradigm are only likely to make incremental changes, adapting and 'stretching' their theories to accommodate new information. At the brink of third order change, their concepts are so stretched that they cannot meaningfully explain and address policy problems. This prompts a 'first principles' battle of ideas (in which current assumptions are challenged and much less is taken for granted) which ends 'when the supporters of a new paradigm secure positions of authority over policymaking and are able to rearrange the organization and standard operating procedures of the policy process so as to institutionalise the new paradigm' (1993: 281).

From both discussions we can ascribe two main roles to ideas. First, they *undermine* policy change. Policymakers establish a language and set of policy assumptions that

excludes most participants. Radical change is rare and only occurs when policy failures are so significant that they produce shifts in power that displace existing policymakers and cause current experts to fall out of favour. Second, when new and significant ideas are adopted, they sweep aside existing policy monopolies (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 237) and cause a complete shift in the way that policy is understood and made within government (Hall, 1993: 287). The policy process is characterised by ‘the presence of a policy paradigm [generating] long periods of continuity punctuated occasionally by the disjunctive experience of a paradigm shift’ (Hall, 1993: 291). The privileged status of a paradigmatic set of ideas ensures that most ideas are ignored or rejected, only to be revisited in rare cases of third order change (following policy failure) or policy punctuations (following intense levels of ‘external’ attention and positive feedback).

The basic set-up of the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) has the potential to give more prominence to the more open and dynamic role of ideas because its starting point is a description of competition between coalitions of policy participants within a broad subsystem: ‘most coalitions will include not only interest group leaders, but also agency officials, legislators from multiple levels of government, applied researchers, and perhaps even a few journalists’ (Sabatier, 1998: 103; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). This suggests that ideas can be produced from and/ or promoted by a wide range of sources and that they are important to the strategies of coalitions. However, the glue that binds these actors together is ‘belief systems’ which circumscribe the effects of new information. These range from ‘core’ beliefs to ‘policy core’ and secondary aspects. Core values are the least susceptible to change. Policy core beliefs may only change following external ‘shocks’ to the system (such as sudden changes in socio-economic conditions). Secondary aspects of beliefs are more subject to change following policy-learning (for example, coalitions may shift their beliefs about the best way to *deliver* policy). These beliefs are refined according to new information based on the evidence from the policy cycle and the ‘enlightenment function’ of actors such as journalists or policy analysts. Advocacy coalitions compete for position within subsystems by learning from past policy and revising their strategic positions based on new evidence and the need to react to external events. Change can come from two main sources: first, from within a coalition which adapts to its policy environment and engages in policy learning to protect its position, or second from a shift in power following a ‘shock’ to the political system or a more successful period of policy learning by a competing coalition. In either case, the role of ideas is not straightforward. In rare cases, ideas can be used to overcome the position of a previously dominant coalition. However, the more frequent and likely scenario is that information is merely assimilated and interpreted selectively by coalitions (according to their policy core beliefs) seeking to maintain their policy positions and world views.

Kingdon’s (1984; 1995) multiple streams analysis has a similar starting point to punctuated equilibrium. While there is an almost unlimited amount of policy problems and solutions that could be considered, very few issues reach the top of the agenda and very few policy solutions are considered. Therefore, our main focus is on what determines which problems and solutions are discussed and what determines whether an idea is accepted or not. Kingdon (1995) suggests that ideas are not accepted, and policy

does not change significantly, unless three separate streams come together at the same time. Policy change requires the coming together of problems (policy issues deemed to require attention), policies (ideas or solutions proposed by pressure participants) and politics (changes in the political system that affect the receptivity to ideas). While solutions already exist, their proponents must wait for the right opportunity to present them and have them adopted. This window of opportunity opens when:

Separate streams come together at critical times. A problem is recognized, a solution is developed and available in the policy community, a political change makes it the right time for policy change, and potential constraints are not severe (Kingdon, 1995: 165-6)

This treatment of ideas shifts the focus from an ‘idea whose time has come’ (suggesting inevitability, with the idea as the main source of explanation) to the need for a range of conditions to be satisfied before a policy will change (suggesting uncertainty, with the acceptance of the idea more important than the idea itself). Since a policy window does not stay open very long, an ‘idea’s time comes, but it also passes’, particularly if the reasons for a particular level of attention to the policy problem fade before a coalition behind policy change can be mobilised (Kingdon, 1995: 169). This shifts our attention from the power of ideas to the significance of the *receptivity* to ideas within government.

While these are universal themes, we may take from this discussion that political systems are central to the explanation of how ideas are promoted. For example, the ability to venue shop and take ideas to new influential audiences may be less likely in a majoritarian system characterised by a concentration of power. However, this seems less and less relevant when we relate the UK to the literature on multi-level governance which describes the dispersal of power vertically, from national central government to other levels of government, and horizontally to non-governmental actors. While the tendency to situate policy studies in contrast to the ‘Westminster Model’ may be getting a bit tired, in this case it sums up a shift in focus from a strong, centralised state which acts unilaterally towards a segmented, disaggregated state which is forced to share power and negotiate with other political actors (Bache and Flinders, 2004: 38). This suggests that the process associated with the promotion and proliferation of, and receptivity to, ideas is changing.

Similar points can be made about policy learning and the transfer of ideas from one jurisdiction to another. The policy transfer literature perhaps gives mixed signals. On the one hand, the process of lesson-drawing suggests a degree of policy convergence between countries regardless of their institutional makeup (although that makeup may influence where lessons are sought and how successful any importation of policy may be – Rose, 1993). The value of a focus on policy convergence, diffusion and transfer is that it helps us identify common policy conditions across a range of regions, explain why policy changes, gauge the extent to which that change is common within political systems and throughout the world and link the process to the transfer of ideas between jurisdictions (Walker, 1969; Bennett, 1991; Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996).

On the other, the UK learns from particular countries such as the US (or England also learns from countries such as France and Germany, while the devolved territories seek lessons from countries such as Finland and Ireland). Yet, this does not suggest exceptionalism because all countries are selective in their lesson-drawing (plus the UK does not restrict its search to majoritarian systems).^v The UK also appears to be no more subject to direct or ‘indirect coercive transfer’ (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996: 348-9) than other countries (unless there is systematic evidence of relative recalcitrance within the EU).

The ideas and policy transfer field is also one which highlights a notional competition to explain policy change in terms of time versus space (or jurisdiction). While these are clearly not mutually exclusive in analytical terms, they compete for our attention when we seek to explain our research results. Tobacco policy change is a good example of this competition. Both Cairney (2009) and Studlar (2004; 2007) qualify the argument that tobacco control was a powerful idea that swept across the globe. Rather, the response varied according to the ‘vested economic interests, cultural practices, and political factors’ of each country and there are significant time-lags between the proposal and acceptance of scientific knowledge and the introduction of solutions which vary from country to country (Studlar 2004). This is even the case *within* the UK, with evidence that all four jurisdictions banned smoking in public places at different times and for different reasons during four separate ‘windows of opportunity’. Nevertheless, if we looked at the comparative adoption of tobacco control, the UK would not seem exceptional compared to other countries (unless we count the fact that it tops the EU league table). The most striking comparison would not be between the UK and other countries, but between the UK now and the UK in the early post-war period when tobacco policy influence was dominated by tobacco companies at the expense of medical interests (Cairney, 2007a).

Departures from Comprehensive Rationality

Comprehensive rationality represents an ‘ideal’ description of the power of a central decision-maker to research and articulate a series of consistent policy aims and then make sure that they are carried out. The point is that the assumptions necessary to demonstrate this power – that organisations can analyse information comprehensively, separate values from facts, rank policy preferences and make policy in a linear fashion – are unrealistic. Therefore, models of the policy process seek to describe what happens when these assumptions are relaxed or rejected: the search for knowledge is limited by capacity and ideology; problem definition is determined by both facts and values; policy makers have multiple, and often unclear, objectives which are difficult to rank in any meaningful way; and, the policy process is difficult to separate into stages and may not be linear (Cairney, 2010a). Most contemporary accounts have adopted Simon’s (1976: xxviii) term ‘bounded rationality’ which suggests that policymakers and organisations ‘satisfice’ (or seek ‘a course of action that is satisfactory or “good enough”’) rather than maximise their utility, and use simple rules of thumb (such as trial-and-error) to address the fact that they cannot research and consider the effects of all options (see also Schlager, 2007: 299-302). Similarly, a common line held by Lindblom’s critics was that, although it has less to offer as an ideal to aspire to, incrementalism represents a more realistic model than

comprehensive rationality. Lindblom (1959; 1979) combines a discussion of the limits to comprehensive rationality with the argument that policymakers rarely pursue non-incremental change, because: (a) they need to build on past policies; and (b) too much effort has already been invested in seeking an agreed position among a wide range of interests to change course radically (suggesting a diffusion of power and an inability to impose change in most instances – i.e. it is too expensive).

The immediate point from this discussion is that many commentators from other countries have, over the years, looked to the UK as an inspirational system that is not subject to the same incremental processes (see Hayes, 2001: 2 on the US, Krauss and Pekkanen, 2004 on Japan, Fabrini and Gilbert, 2000: 28 on Italy and Kitschelt and Streeck, 2003: 2 on Germany). Yet, most aspects of incrementalism do not relate specifically to political systems. Rather, they relate as much to limited information and cognitive abilities and the need to build on past policies as they do to the levels of bargaining and compromise within political systems.

The same can be said for inertia. While majoritarianism may be associated with the ability to change policy quickly from the top-down, the evidence for this is not persuasive. Rather, for example, Rose (1990; Rose and Davies, 1994) highlights the effect of decades of cumulative policies; newly elected policymakers inherit a huge government with massive commitments (and service delivery is often effectively automatic). Since governments are more likely to introduce new than terminate old policies, the cumulative effect is profound. Similarly, Hogwood and Peters (1983; see also Geva-May, 2004) argue that the size and scope of the state is such that any 'new' policy is likely to be a revision of an old one following a degree of policy failure. Policy succession is more likely than innovation because the issue already has legitimacy, the resources for a service delivery institution exist and policy has an established clientele. More significant innovations also require policy termination to reduce costs before committing new resources. Yet, complete termination also has immediate costs (financial and political), may smack of failure without direct replacement, may be opposed by groups and interests associated with the policy, and may be undermined by organisations operating in relative anonymity (if policy is 'technical' or obscure) or seeking new ways to justify their existence. Policymaking may therefore be more about dealing with the legacies of past decisions than departing incrementally from them.

The same can also be said for discussions of rationality and governance. For example, multi-level governance suggests that large fragmented governments lack a powerful 'centre': 'No single actor has all knowledge and information required to solve complex, dynamic and diversified problems, no actor has sufficient overview to make the application of needed instruments effective, no single actor has sufficient action potential to dominate unilaterally in a particular governing model' (Kooiman, 1993: 4). Rather, policy outcomes result from the complex interplay between governmental and non-governmental actors at a variety of levels. This includes the 'street' level. A 'street-level bureaucracy' approach to implementation suggests that although legislation is made at the 'top', it is influenced heavily by the public sector professions (teachers, doctors, police officers, judges, welfare officers) who deliver it. Policy is effectively made by

street-level bureaucrats at the ‘bottom’ when dealing with their clients. Since they are subject to an immense range of (often unclear) requirements laid down by regulations at the top, they are powerless to implement them all successfully. Instead, they establish routines and use rules of thumb to satisfy a proportion of central government objectives while preserving a sense of professional autonomy necessary to maintain morale (Lipsky, 1980). Overall, the UK shares with other countries a set of policy constraints that are universal, rather than tied to specific political systems.

And Finally: Complexity Theory – Is Everything Exceptional?

Complexity theory may become, like governance, something that means all things to all people. Or, perhaps it can be used to prove any argument. I am therefore reluctant to place too much emphasis in this final discussion (particularly since I discuss these issues in two other PSA papers - Cairney, 2010b and 2010c). That said, the moral of complexity theory seems to be that there are so many factors influencing how policy changes (or doesn’t change) that a focus on one is always misleading. As Geyer (2003: 572) states when discussing Scandinavian exceptionalism: ‘Of course, there are broad general categories within which countries can be placed. However, the minute one begins to examine the countries in detail, the usefulness of the categories dissipates’. This takes us back to the point raised in the introduction. A key tenet of public policy analysis is that the outcomes of policy processes vary markedly by policy area, policy issue, time, territory and type of political system. Complexity theory suggests that this list of sources of variation is too long to count. If we accept this premise, then the question becomes: why privilege one factor (the electoral system and the behaviour it allegedly encourages) above all others? Why associate comparative politics primarily with a comparison of jurisdictions and political systems?

Conclusion

The existence of UK difference or exceptionalism is more assumed than proven. The same can be said for the difference that its electoral system and majoritarian and centralised structure has on policy when compared with ‘consensual’ political systems. This is most apparent when we study the ‘British Policy Style’ and compare it to other countries or when we compare the UK Government to its devolved counterparts. In both cases, the evidence suggests that the UK is not a special case. Rather, it is subject to the same ‘logic of consultation’ that most governments accept when they delegate decision-making to specialists and relatively junior civil servants. This theme continues throughout an examination of numerous theories of public policy. With institutionalism we weigh up the importance of the formal institutional structures specific to each country and the informal ‘equilibrium ways of doing things’ and rules of the game within policy networks. With the role and transfer of ideas, we account for not only the differences within political systems when ideas are promoted and transferred, but also the universal nature of idea formation and transfer and the increasingly diverse range of ‘venues’ within which they are discussed in the UK. With bounded rationality, incrementalism and inertia we see that majoritarian and allegedly top-down political systems are not immune from the factors that constrain radical policy change. Finally, with complexity theory, we may question the value of singling out one factor – territory or type of political system – among the many factors (including, most notably, time) that influence

differences in policy change across time and jurisdiction. Therefore, while we might identify UK differences in policy processes and outcomes, we should not assume that they exist.

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ⁱ Also note the strong similarities between the UK policy communities literature and Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) study of the US.

ⁱⁱ For example, massive post-war high rise housing and road construction schemes were introduced quickly and before decision-makers realised their damaging effects. Post-1979 ideas such as de-regulation and marketisation infected a range of policy sectors.

ⁱⁱⁱ Note that positive feedback refers to a response which amplifies the original 'signal' (such as lobbying or other sources of information to policymakers) while negative feedback reduces the effect of the signal (i.e. unlike negative student feedback it does not refer to a bad evaluation).

^{iv} Although note that Hall uses the term 'punctuated equilibrium' to refer to a different literature.

^v If anything, the US is exceptional here because few accounts of the role of ideas (beyond the state level) acknowledge the scope for coercion when policy is transferred.