Policy Learning Post-Crisis: In Defence of the Public Inquiry

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Abstract

A common commentary in political science, public policy and organisational research is that the public inquiry is an ineffectual policy learning mechanism. This conventional wisdom has also found its way into studies of crises and crisis management, underpinning a view that governments repeat the mistakes of the past because of their inability to learn in the aftermath of disaster. This paper contends that this view is incorrect and that it is a result of the academy failing to learn rather than the state. Drawing upon four international case studies of inquiries, operationalised via 100 interviews with ministers, policy officials, inquiry personnel and associated policy actors, this paper shows unequivocally that post-crisis inquiries do regularly produce forms of policy learning that enhance our safety from future threats. We therefore need to re-evaluate our judgements about the public inquiry. Revaluations need to consider the strong likelihood that post-crisis inquiries are much more influential than we currently believe and the possibility, which now needs to be explored properly, that inquiries generally may be more effective than our current knowledge insinuates.

Introduction

If one were to take a historical look at the causes of crises and the ways in which states (mis)manage them, a series of long-standing patterns would be revealed. These familiar and (supposedly) immutable patterns exist in the causes of crises, in the problematic ways in which states respond to them and, most importantly, in the factors that continue to make us vulnerable to them. The existence of these patterns, despite intensive efforts to learn lessons after each new crisis, appears to offer compelling evidence of our propensity to repeat the mistakes of the past. As a consequence, the critique that governments struggle to acquire and absorb policy knowledge in ways which can keep us safe from future threats is commonplace within crisis research (see, inter alia, Boin et al. 2008: 13; Elliott and Macpherson 2010: 574; Drennan et al. 2015: 193). In short, it seems that because we are not very good at learning and changing after crises we see repetitions of failure across time.

This pessimistic take on the capacity of governments to learn from crises moves us directly to the purpose of this paper because, if the picture of patterned intransigence briefly sketched out above is correct, then the dominant mechanism for learning about crises - the post-crisis inquiry - needs to be indicted as an obsolete institution. In light of this, the question that animates this paper is as important as it is simple. Can post-crisis inquiries deliver effective lesson-learning which will reduce our vulnerability to future threats? Conventional wisdom suggests that the answer to this question should be an emphatic no. Outside of the academy, for example, inquiries are regularly vilified as costly wastes of time that illuminate very little (The Telegraph 2004; House of Commons 2004; The Guardian 2016) while inside the academy
there is no shortage of scholars who appear to be willing to present charges in this regard. Inquiries have been repeatedly derided as ineffectual when it comes to lesson learning for a whole variety of reasons. They are said to be a ritual, a ceremony or a placebo designed to restore faith in the status quo without creating genuine change (Stringer and Richardson 1979; Ashforth 1990; Gephart 2007). The Machiavellian politician or the clever mandarin can supposedly steer them from a distance in ways that can turn them from an independent mechanism to a creature of government (Clokie and Robinson 1937; Herbert 1961; Acland 1980; Prasser 1994; HC 2004). They have been defined as interpretive exercises through which history is said to be manufactured rather than faithfully recorded (Brown 2000; 2004; Boudes and Laroche 2009) and public theatres in which the politics of blaming and the fight for reputation and survival compromises the lesson learning function (Borodzicz 2006; Boin et al. 2008; Eburn and Dovers 2015). The bottom line, however, may be much simpler. Perhaps it is merely the case that the classic inquiry model, which was designed in the early twentieth century, is now inimical to policy learning in the twenty-first (Elliott and McGuiness 2002).

This paper challenges the conventional wisdom that inquiries are an ineffectual policy learning mechanism. In the pages that follow, a typology of different policy learning types is developed and used as an analytical framework for an international comparison of four different inquiries, underpinned by evidence from 100 interviews. The findings illustrate clearly that more often than not, inquiries manage to produce valid lessons, policy change and reform outcomes that help moderate the threat from future crises. This final point is worth underscoring because in each case, the reforms that emerged via these inquiries were put to the test by subsequent emergencies, each significant enough to escalate into a larger crisis if not handled effectively. In those specific instances, the inquiry driven changes were found to have enhanced resilience. The data therefore underpins an argument that post-crisis inquiries are effective mechanisms for learning about crises and that they regularly propel substantive policy reforms, which subsequently reduce vulnerability to future threats. Thus need to rethink conventional (but largely unsubstantiated) views about inquiries because in this area it appears to be the academy, rather than the state, that is not learning properly.

However, there is a great deal of nuance that needs to be unpicked underneath that headline. In this regard our typological framework for analysis is helpful because it allows us to see the kinds of learning outcomes that inquiries are effective at producing and also that they struggle to produce. The key argument in this regard is that post-crisis inquiries are most effective at producing ‘instrumental learning’ and ‘cognitive organisational learning’. These types were the most prevalent across all cases. The predominance of instrumental learning means that post-crisis inquiries are better suited to developing specific policy tools that can enhance pre-existing policy systems (as per Peter May’s (1992: 335) definition). Cognitive organisational learning is a category defined by the development of coherence between the views of different actors (see Huber 1991: 89). In practical terms what this means is that post-crisis inquiries encourage different actors to get to know themselves and their place within a larger network of policy relevant actors’ who are germane to the management of crisis. This type of learning can therefore
enhance coordination, inter-connectedness and a collective appreciation of a policy space, which can in turn enhance pre-crisis preparedness and actual crisis response.

The paper proceeds as follows. An abbreviated review of inquiry research is presented immediately below in which the case is made that the extant research is incapable of delivering firm conclusions about the effectiveness of the inquiry as a policy learning mechanism. This is because it is blighted by conceptual and methodological weaknesses. Thereafter we present our theoretical and empirical response. The paper’s theorising orientates around a discussion of the nature of policy learning in relation to inquiries, which culminates in a typology of policy learning. The typology is then applied to four international case studies of inquiry learning from Westminster systems: the Canadian SARS outbreak of 2003 and the SARS Commission; the UK summer floods of 2007 and the Pitt Review; the 2009 Australian ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires and the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission; and the 2010 Christchurch earthquake and the Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission. The cases are operationalized by 100 interviews across the four different countries with sponsoring ministers, inquiry chairs and personnel, implementing officials and policy stakeholders. The data that emerges from this analysis is unequivocal. It supports an emphatic yes in answer to the question of whether or not inquiries are effective at policy learning. This is because in each of the cases a clear line of sight is drawn between certain lessons that were proposed by these inquiries, specific reforms implemented as a consequence, and perceived reductions in vulnerability.

**The Sorry State of the Art**

The academy’s failure to learn about inquiries in ways which are authoritative means that we cannot adequately determine whether or how the state learns through them. We still do not know enough about how inquiries operate, what they produce and, perhaps most importantly, the relationships that do or do not exist between their operations and their outcomes. This is a long-standing complaint. As far back as 1937, commentators were complaining about the lack of knowledge surrounding inquiries, making the case that ‘the scanty literature on the subject displays vagueness and uncertainty, as well as definite error and contradiction, not only as to the origins of these bodies, but also in regard to their institutional significance’ (Clokie and Robinson 1937: v). Not much has changed since. Methodological and conceptual issues continue to undermine our understanding. As a consequence, we should not easily accept any conventional wisdom that writes the inquiry off as an obsolete institution. However, the state of our knowledge as it stands does not mean that we should rush to unequivocally validate them either.

The methodological problems are significant. Most studies of inquiries, whether positive or negative about their worth, are ‘one-offs’ about specific investigations (for example, Brown 2004). Notwithstanding one or two rare examples (Althaus 1994; Prasser and Tracey 2014), there is a general absence of international and historical comparison in the field. Large swaths of analysis are descriptive, a-theoretical and focused upon the minutia of inquiry format and constitution (for example, Stevens...
The interpretations of inquiry actors are rarely canvassed in an in-depth manner - interview data is in short supply - and systematic social science methodology is generally eschewed in favour of general commentary (for example, Howe 1999). As such, the vast majority of the claims recorded above about the problems that prejudice inquiry lesson learning do not emerge from detailed empirical studies that follow the methodological conventions of social science. Hence, Scott Prasser’s summary of the literature, made more than two decades ago, is still apposite today:

What we have is a lot of detail about individual inquiries, explanations or generalisations about their roles … At best these views are more in the nature of ‘folklore’ than being able to provide any conceptual framework that can be empirically tested. Of course like most folklore, such explanations are often insightful, useful and correct but, also like folklore, they are unsystematic, unproven and difficult to apply to future cases. (Prasser 1994: 2)

As Prasser alludes to, conceptual issues also undermine our knowledge. Broadly speaking, scholars interested in inquiries either examine problems of knowledge acquisition (the inquiry itself) or problems of implementation (resistance to inquiry recommendations within central government). As a consequence, a basic two-stage view of lesson-learning blights the literature – inquiries acquire knowledge and this is then accepted or rejected by governments (Elliott 2009). This view downplays the complex and crowded reality of policy learning in the modern state. One problematic outcome of this partial view, for example, is that functions which are crucial to inquiry success, relating to issues ‘beyond’ the inquiry room and the corridors of central government are largely neglected in the inquiry literature. A second problem is that other influential actors and dynamics, widely cited as important in the policy learning literature, are neglected from the analysis, despite their potential importance. Thus the role of scientific communities (Haas 1992), advocacy groups (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) and international bodies (Rose 1991; Dolowitz and Marsh 2000), for example, have been ignored in studies of the inquiry despite the fact that they have been defined as important factors in policy learning generally. A third problem – which we deal with in this paper – is that policy learning is not properly conceptualised at all within inquiry research. What does it mean to learn through an inquiry? How might we analyse that learning? And how should we evaluate the effectiveness of a learning episode? Inquiry research tells us next to nothing in answer to these questions. We address them here theoretically and empirically. Let’s us begin with the theoretical response.

Types of Learning and Post-Crisis Inquiries

It is easy to feel frustration when reading the literature on organisational and policy learning. Although certainly sophisticated, the field contains a dizzying array of definitions, foci and theory, all under the rubric of ‘learning’ yet orientated towards rather different concerns. And where there is consensus, it tends to be found in claims that the field is conceptually ambiguous, in need of greater integration and altogether a bit too complex for its own good (Huber 1991: 89; Levy 1994: 280; Birkland 2004: 344;
Schofield 2004: 291; Dunlop and Radaelli 2013: 600). Hence we are told, for example, that getting to grips with policy learning is akin to sweeping ‘a conceptual minefield’ (Levy 1994: 279); that the literature as a whole is ‘vague and elusive. Its guiding concept is characterized by confusion and scholars find the phenomenon hard to define, isolate, measure and apply’ (Deverell 2009: 180); and that the differences between the major works in the field mean that ‘the entire phenomenon of experience-induced policy change remains difficult to operationalise’ (Bennett and Howlett 1992: 276).

Nevertheless, we must cut a path through this minefield. We need to be quite clear about what we mean when we use the term policy learning and what we mean when we use it in relation to post-crisis inquiries. However, we do not merely wish to clarify terms. We also require a framework to interrogate our case studies. This is provided below via a typology of inquiry-related policy. This typology fine-grains our understanding of the inquiry by showing us that there are many different outcomes through which learning can be evidenced and, as we shall see, allows for a nuanced analysis of policy learning that does not currently exist in studies of the public inquiry.

**Individual Learning**

The one meaningful consensus across the policy and organisational learning literature in terms of definition is that learning, in essence, begins with a cognitive change in the *individual* (Rose 1991: 7; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993: 123; Dunlop and Radaelli 2013: 600). This at least gives us an agreed-upon departure point. Learning means a change in an actor’s beliefs, insight or understanding (Levy 1994: 287), which can result as part of a conscious choice (Friedlander 1983: 194) or an unintentional process (Huber 1991: 89). Moreover, the vast majority of the learning literature tells us that these changes will usually, but not always, be drawn from experience (for an alternative to experiential learning, see Argyris and Schön (1978: 42) and Stern’s (1997: 72) discussion of the dialectical learning perspective).

More often than not, individual cognitive learning will lead to a change in behaviour. We need to be careful here, however, because matching behavioural change to actual instances of learning is difficult. The problem here relates to the fact that people can change their behaviour for all kinds of reasons, not just because they have learned something in a meaningful sense (see Levy 1994: 289-290 for examples). Thus, following Levy (1994: 291), we caution against using changed behaviour as a sole indicator of policy learning. Instead we need to show a connection between a cognitive and a behavioural change in order to evidence policy learning. In simple terms what this means is that it is not enough to show that reform has taken place after an inquiry has reported. We need to connect the *specific* lessons produced by an inquiry to *specific* policy reforms and be assured that these changes are underpinned by a cognitive adjustment that was also encouraged by the inquiry.

At the individual level of learning, however, it is also generally agreed that learning can take place without motivating a change in behaviour (Rose 1991: 7; May 1992: 336; Levy 1994: 282). It may, for example, simply lead to a ‘change in one’s cognitive maps or understandings’ (Friedlander’s 1983: 194), ‘growths in intelligence’ (Etheredge and Short 1983: 42-43) or an increased awareness of the range of
potential behaviours that one might adopt (Huber 1991: 89). The important point of note is that none of these changes can be easily evidenced through a change in behaviour. To get at these changes we therefore need to go directly to an individual and ask them about their cognitive development. Despite this hurdle, we can maintain that changes in the cognitive and behavioural capacities of key individuals represents evidence of ‘individual’ policy learning.

**Organisational Learning**

Organisational literature often emphasises the view, first developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1978: 9-11), that there is something rather metaphorical about the idea of organisational learning (Birkland 2006: 12). This is said because it is individuals rather than organisations that are animated with the DNA of learning (stimuli, beliefs, and memory) and to reify individual attributes onto an organisation is misleading. However, the idea that learning cannot be organisational has been challenged. There are those, such as Cook and Yanow (1996), for example, who suggest that individuals cannot perform organisational functions because these are, by definition, collective actions. Thus the argument is that when a ‘group acquires the knowledge associated with its ability to carry out its collective activities that constitutes organisational learning’ (Cook and Yanow 1996: 438). This resonates with Etheredge and Short’s (1983: 48) claim that government learning can be seen in a ‘collective institutional coherence’ within government that can exist beyond the borders of its constituent parts, or indeed, even the consciousness of its individual members. From this view, organisational learning in government is evidenced in a more sophisticated appreciation of the whole, one’s place within it and a sense of a collective beyond the self.

Barbara Levitt and James March (1988) took this notion of collective institutional autonomy further. They responded to those who denied the existence of organisational learning on ontological grounds by developing the concept of institutional memory, through which:

organizations are seen as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour. … The experiential lessons of history are captured in a way that makes the lessons, but not the history, accessible to organizations and organizational members who have not experienced that history. … They are recorded in a collective memory that is often coherent but is sometimes jumbled, that often endures but is sometimes lost. (Levitt and March 1988: 320)

This is a very popular view (Levy 1994: 288; Mahler 1997: 524-525; Dekker and Hansén 2004: 219) and it suggests, as it was intended to, that the organisation is something more than an aggregation of individual learners. It can be autonomous in the sense that it owns a memory which can grow and decline through adaptations that are beyond any one agent.

What this literature gives us, therefore, is an avenue to see organisational learning as a form of policy learning through which individuals and groups develop new understandings, which then inform changes to institutional memory and/or changes to organisational routines that improve collective activities. These two types of
change – in institutionalised routines and collective action - are considered here to be forms of ‘organisational’ policy learning. We can say that this kind of learning has occurred, in the context of this book, if it is the consequence of an inquiry’s lessons.

However, just as individual learning can be purely cognitive, so can organisational learning be distinct from concrete and clearly observable forms of organisational change. Here again, we have to be cautious as it seems to be theoretically possible for groups to enjoy growths in intelligence without these necessarily impacting on the ‘hard’ components of an organisation. Cultural issues, traditions, notions of appropriateness and such like, for example, can all develop through collective belief changes in an organisation but they may not be easily identifiable in its standard operating routines. Therefore what we are calling here ‘organisational’ policy learning can also encapsulate belief change within and across groups that may not necessarily be evidenced in behavioural change.

**Single and Double Loop Learning**

We can also make a further distinction between types of organisational learning by considering the culture in which individuals and organisations learn and, consequentially, the scope of the outcomes that emerge. The most influential contribution in this regard is undoubtedly Argyris and Schön’s work on ‘single loop’ and ‘double loop’ learning (Argyris and Schön 1978). This dichotomy has had a real influence over the thinking of crisis management scholars in terms of learning (Boin et al. 2005: 121; Smith and Elliott 2007: 522; Deverell 2009: 181). The clearest description of these two concepts comes from Argyris himself:

Individuals or organizations who achieve their intentions or correct an error without reexamining their underlying values may be said to be single loop learning. They are acting like a thermostat that corrects error (the room is too hot or cold) without questioning its program (why am I set at 68 degrees?). If the thermostat did question its setting or why it should be measuring heat at all, that would require examining the underlying program. This is called double loop learning. (Argyris 1982: xii)

Single and double loop learning therefore represent two concepts which describe different approaches to learning, based upon different value orientations, which in turn lead to different levels of reflection. A single loop approach suggests that we can learn and correct errors without questioning the values that sit beneath the error or the values that sit beneath our own efforts to learn about them. In this context, reflection on the learning process itself will be absent and:

There will be relatively little public testing of ideas (especially those that may be important and threatening). Consequently, the actors will not seek feedback that genuinely confronts their actions, and those controlled will tend to play it safe ... As a result, many of the hypotheses or hunches that people generate will become self-sealing or self-fulfilling. Moreover, whatever learning people develop will tend to be within the confines of what is acceptable. … Few people will confront the validity of the goal or the values implicit in the situation. (Argyris, 1982: 88, emphasis added)
A double loop approach suggests that we need to reflect upon deeper values, again in terms of the focus of our learning and the learning process through which we might pursue that focus. As a consequence, double loop learning is characterised by a willingness to scrutinise and challenge the meanings given to information in a constructive manner (Argyris 1982: 103). Thus:

The consequences for learning are an emphasis on double-loop learning, in which the basic assumptions behind ideas or policies are confronted, in which hypotheses are tested publicly, and in which the processes are disconfirmable, not self-sealing. The end result should be … that errors and failures will be communicated openly and that actors will learn from the feedback. (Argyris 1982: 103-104, emphasis added)

Single loop policy learning processes will therefore be seen in an inquiry process if actors do not constructively reflect and/or debate how they are learning and the objects of their learning. This will produce an unwillingness to challenge the prevailing norms and assumptions behind the policies and systems that have produced errors. Consequentially, single loop policy learning outcomes in the context of an inquiry will be reflected in an abundance of narrow, technical lessons. Double loop policy learning, however, will be evidenced in constructive deliberations across different actors, about how to produce lessons and the nature of those lessons. This will produce a willingness to confront deeper values and assumptions behind the policies and systems that have produced errors. Consequentially, double loop learning outcomes in the context of an inquiry will be reflected in lessons orientated towards values, assumptions and cultural norms.

**Policy Learning in Political Science**

Peter May’s (1992: 336) typology of policy learning has a proven track-record in terms of structuring the search for policy learning evidence (see Birkland 2004; 2006). It is also expansive enough to act as an organising schema through which we can discuss other important literatures. May’s typology categorises what Dunlop and Radaelli (2013: 200) call the ‘products’ of policy learning into three types: *instrumental policy learning, social policy learning and political learning*. One of the strengths of this triptych is that May spends some time setting out the evidence base needed to show the existence of each type of learning. Importantly, these indicators span cognitive, behavioural and organisational dimensions.

Instrumental policy learning ‘entails new understandings about the viability of policy interventions or implementation designs’ (May 1992: 335). This is the learning of policy evaluation and redesign and the intention is self-evident: to identify issues and improve the performance of policy instruments. The primary learners here are policy officials and the underpinning logic is rational-analytic. In order to evidence this type of policy learning, the cognitive change (individual or collective) would consist of an ‘increased understanding of policy instruments or implementation’ and behavioural change (individual or collective) would be seen in ‘policy redesign entailing change in instruments’ (May 1992: 336). In simple terms, therefore, *we can see instrumental learning when an inquiry propels a change of thinking in government which then produces new or revised policy tools*. 

Social policy learning ‘entails a new or reaffirmed social construction of a policy by the policy elites of a given policy domain’ (May 1992: 337). In this type, May emphasises the rethinking of the fundamentals of a policy: the nature of the problem, causal beliefs, and the goals and target groups, for example. This is a much more ideationally centred form of policy learning and it’s about the big stuff. This category is one reflection of a larger lineage of works, which have developed the concept of social learning more broadly (Heclo 1974; Lindblom 1990; Hall 1993). We need to be careful here because these authors often talk at cross-purposes (see Bennett and Howlett 1992) but, generally, they tend to focus upon the ways in which the social environment propels policy learning inside government by changing notions of appropriateness amongst elites. For Heclo (1974: 305) this is something of an automatic and gradual process: the daily grind of incrementalism is seen to be a result of the state ‘puzzling’ its way slowly through policy reforms as a reaction to social stimuli. For others, such as Peter Hall, it is more purposive because a range of changes, from ‘first order’ instrumental tinkering to ‘third order’ paradigm overhaul, can result from a deliberate state response to external pressure (Hall 1993). May’s description of social policy learning reflects Hall’s understanding of third order ideational change more than Heclo’s. This can be seen in the indicators of social policy learning. At the cognitive level we are told to search for ‘change in dominant causal beliefs within the relevant policy domain’ and at the organisational level ‘policy redefinition entailing change in policy goals or scope’ (May 1992: 336). In an inquiry context, therefore, social learning will be seen if an inquiry propels a change of thinking amongst elites about the primary ideas, objectives and priorities of a policy area.

May’s final type is focused upon the interface between politics and policy. Political learning ‘entails policy advocates learning about strategies for advocating policy ideas or drawing attention to policy problems’ (May 1992: 339). This type draws upon another significant theory of policy learning and change, the Advocacy Coalition Approach (ACF) (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). However, what May defines as political learning are instances in which coalition members improve their advocacy tactics; the ways in which, for example, they challenge the validity of data, counter opposing causal arguments, mobilise support for their cause and enlarge their coalition (May 1992: 339). The cognitive indicator for this type of learning is a change to the ‘awareness of relationship between political strategy and political feasibility within a given advocacy coalition’ while at the behavioural level, political learning is evidenced in policy advocates changing their political strategies (May 1992: 336). Thus political policy learning will be seen in an inquiry context when inquiry lessons provide an impetus for policy advocacy relating to reform.

If we bring all these strands together we can present a basic typology of policy learning that combines notions of cognitive and behavioural learning and change, individual and organisational learning and change, instrumental, social policy and political learning and change. This is presented in Table 1 overleaf. Let us be clear about our analytical intentions vis-à-vis this typology. Initially the aim is to use it to ascertain the nature of policy learning in each case, which is anticipated to be multi-dimensional in nature. This process is distinct from any assessment of effectiveness. However, once we have an understanding of the types that are and are not in play, the research will assess what they produce.
### Table One: Policy Learning Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Type</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Behavioural</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through a change in the cognitive capacities of a policy actor</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through changes in the behaviour of a policy actor if it is caused by altered cognition</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through changes in the collective or shared cognitive capacities of an organisational group</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through changes in organisational routine that improve collective activities and through changes in institutional memory if they are caused by altered cognition</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Loop</td>
<td>Single loop policy learning will occur when actors do not constructively reflect or debate how and what they are learning</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through narrow changes to pre-existing systems and policies. Small-scale change likely</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Loop</td>
<td>Double loop policy learning will occur when multiple actors engage in constructive reflections and deliberations about how and what they are learning</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through changes to the assumptions, values and norms behind existing structures, norms, policies. Large-scale change likely</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through an increased understanding of policy instruments and implementation</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through change to instruments if they are caused by an increased understanding of policy instruments or implementation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through changes in the most important causal beliefs within the policy domain</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through redefinitions of policy goals and priorities if they are caused by changes in causal beliefs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs through changes in awareness of advocacy strategies that can facilitate greater levels of political feasibility</td>
<td>Policy learning occurs when political advocates change their strategies if this is caused by changes in their awareness re political feasibility</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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in terms of effectiveness. In keeping with our main research question, the single criteria used for measuring the effectiveness of any type of policy learning is whether or not it reduces (or has the capacity to reduce) vulnerability to subsequent events of a broadly similar nature.

**Method and Cases**

The paper uses a comparative study of four international cases of post-crisis learning: the Canadian SARS outbreak of 2003 and the SARS Commission; the UK summer floods of 2007 and the Pitt Review; the 2009 Australian ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires and the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission; and the 2010 Christchurch earthquake and the Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission.

These cases were initially chosen for one simple reason. In each case, after these inquiries reported and their reform processes concluded, new emergencies have arrived to test those. Thus after SARS Ontario has, amongst other things, had to respond to an H1N1 pandemic, a serious Legionnaires outbreak and an Ebola scare. After the 2010-11 Canterbury earthquakes, New Zealand has experienced a number of serious tremors and one large-scale incident – the 2016 Kaikoura earthquake. In England, the 2013-14 Winter Floods put the Pitt reforms to the test and, across Australia, bushfire seasons pose threats to communities on an annual basis. What we have in each case therefore is a chance to see not only what reforms were put in place as a consequence of these inquiries but also what effect those reforms had in real emergencies after they were implemented. This allows us to properly address whether inquiries produce outcomes that make us safer from future threats.

However, the cases were also chosen because they represent very different inquiry formats. The Pitt Review was run by public managers using the tools of policy research. The SARS Commission, although chaired by a judge and assisted by counsel, chose to utilise an Accident Investigation Board model. The Royal Commission into the Victorian Bushfires employed a mixed methodology that merged community consultations and novel types of hearing into the evidence taking process. And the Royal Commission into the Canterbury Earthquakes took a predominantly legal-judicial route, which was complemented by formats designed to encourage the use of technical, engineering logic. In this sense the research design is predominantly ‘most-different’ in nature because it is calibrated to look for similarities across four very different inquiries. This aspect of the design enhances the generalizability of the paper’s arguments because they emerge from shared themes generated across difference (see Landman 2003 for a discussion of most similar and most different designs).

Exactly 100 interviews were conducted for this research project. The interviewee sample reflects the polycentric nature of the learning episodes themselves. In each case, multiple groups of actor were interviewed. First were those who were involved in the design of the inquiries and those who staffed them. The purpose of interviewing this group is relatively clear. The intent was to develop data that provided an understanding of how those ‘on the inside’ of these inquiries viewed the process and outcomes of policy learning. The second group of interviewees represent those who were called to give
Evidence in one form or another to the inquiries. The purpose of interviewing this group was to determine whether or not the views of those who had worked inside inquiries could be corroborated. This group mostly consisted of members of the public service, local government officials and emergency services personnel. The third group were those directly responsible for the implementation of inquiry lessons: primarily central government and local government officials, members of the emergency services, front-line public sector workers and non-government and not-for-profit agencies. With this group the requirement was to find out whether or not the inquiries generated feasible lessons that could be implemented, whether reforms had occurred which institutionalised those lessons and, crucially, whether or not there was a sense that any changes that had occurred had reduced vulnerability to future threats. In order to corroborate their claims, the final group of interviewees represent a range of experts who were not directly involved in the lesson learning process per se but who are nevertheless still heavily invested in each relevant policy area. These interviewees were found in research centres, independent advisory bodies, professional membership bodies, peak associations, advocacy groups, so-called ‘quango’s’ within the policy space and also within government agencies via officials, unconnected to the inquiries themselves, who were prepared to candidly assess the state of play in their specific jurisdiction. Let us now turn to the data that they provided.

**Instrumental Policy Learning**

The learning typology set out above drew on the work of Peter May (1992: 335) in order to suggest that we can evidence instrumental learning when an inquiry propels a change of thinking in government, which then produces new or revised policy tools. It is worth recalling here, however, that a number of associations need to be present before we can suggest that inquiries produce this form of learning. Behavioural changes (the creation and the operation of the new instruments themselves) need to be linked to prior cognitive changes (increased understanding of the need for new instruments) and both need to be specifically associated with the work of an inquiry. In other words, to evidence instrumental learning interviewees needed to identify a new policy instrument created post-crisis and then associate that instrument directly with a lesson identified by the inquiry. This connection was made repeatedly across all of the case studies. Thus instrumental policy learning was clearly evidenced. Moreover, in each case the instruments discussed were specifically linked to improvements in crisis management, which were evidenced in subsequent crises.

**Instrumental Learning in the United Kingdom**

In the United Kingdom, the evidence shows that instrumental learning driven by the Pitt Review resulted in flood management tools that improved the government’s capacity to map flood risks, forecast floods more effectively and to warn more citizens in a timely manner as a consequence. The single most cited instrument in this regard is the Flood Forecasting Centre (FCC), which brings together a small team of hydrologists from the Environment Agency with meteorologists from the UK’s Met. Office. Those
involved in the creation of the FCC were in no doubt that the authority of the Pitt Review was crucial to its creation:

The thing about inquiries looking back – especially Sir Michael Pitt – is that it does connect organisations better. So independent organisations, if they do lessons learned, will always do reviews but they tend to do them independently. They bring their organisational learning’s into themselves. An independent inquiry pushes connections, so if the Met. Office had done their review in 2007, the Environment Agency had done their review in 2007, would we have gone as bold as the Flood Forecasting Centre? These things are usually impossible but the inquiry helped enable that. (Environment Agency Official A, interview)

Prior to 2007, citizens in high risk flood prone communities had to apply to the Environment Agency to join a telephone warning scheme that would alert them to potential threats. After 2007 an opt-out scheme exponentially increased the number of citizens receiving warnings. This represents a second example of instrumental learning. Finally here a third tool implemented as a consequence of the Pitt Review was the creation of surface water flood maps. Once again, these instruments were directly associated with the inquiry by implementing officials:

He [Pitt] recognised that whereas we had fantastic maps of where a river was likely to flood if it bursts its banks, there was absolutely no information available to the general public or to insurers or to local authorities on surface water flooding and where that was likely to be a problem. So his insistence that maps were produced within six months of the end of his Inquiry showing what areas of England and Wales were at risk from surface water flooding was a major change. That was the one thing he did, which was not expected and was actually quite tricky. I was at the forefront of implementing that. It was actually quite tricky to implement but it made the difference by 2009 and certainly by 2013-14. (Former Environment Agency Official B, interview, emphasis added)

In November 2009, two years after the Pitt Review reported, severe flooding struck the north of England and the border regions of Scotland. Two died and over 2000 properties were flooded in a period which saw the heaviest rainfall in a twenty-four hour period since records began. This flood was characterised by river and surface water flooding. Four years later, between December 2013 and February 2014 England and Wales experienced a second significant flooding emergency caused by highly unusual clustering of twelve intense storms. A combination of exceptional rainfall, gale force winds and a 19 year high tide, created river, groundwater and tidal flooding with high energy surges across 3000km of coastline. These became known as the 13-14 winter floods in which 11,000 properties were flooded but no casualties recorded. While the impact of both of these events was serious, policy stakeholders consistently made the case that the capacity of the system to better forecast and warn via the instruments noted above saved lives and property. Inside the Environment Agency, for example, the FCC was said to be:
worth its weight in gold in subsequent events and then the major series of events of 2013-14. The existence of the Flood Forecasting Centre was a huge benefit and it meant we were able to get warnings out better and we were also able to deploy temporary defences much more effectively than we had before and that probably - certainly - saved lives and it almost certainly saved quite a number of properties from being flooded and that was the obvious real plus that came out of Pitt. It was a clear recommendation that was implemented immediately and it worked. (Lord Smith, interview, emphasis added)

One senior official who was at the centre of the 13-14 winter floods response conveyed just how important the FCC’s detection capacity was to the crisis response:

In our ensemble forecast, you could see every model showing low pressure in the North Sea at the same time as the high tides and then there was the prediction of the storm. Now, what was fascinating, as a bit of a geek, I grabbed my iPad and I looked for a satellite image to see where this whirling storm was now before it hit us and the thing that I’ll always remember is that there was no storm at that point because it had yet to form! They were giving us a warning, but this thing only existed in the supercomputers. It had yet to form in the Atlantic and then move over and hit us. We effectively managed to mobilise around a thing that didn’t exist. (Environment Agency Official A, interview)

This is the example of a successful lesson identified by an inquiry, learned and implemented by government and then tested successfully in a future emergency. While it would be tempting to write off these views as self-serving narratives presented by flood managers in Whitehall, there was also widespread support for these views outside of central government. It was recognised across the policy community that Pitt-led changes had enhanced responses to these floods. In the emergency services, for example, it was recognised that the FCC had ‘worked brilliantly, helping to translate what the scientists were saying into the right language for the emergency services control rooms’ (UK Fire Chief A, interview). Others praised the Environment Agency for having ‘done all sorts of wonderful things in terms of forecasting and modelling and prediction’ (Former NFU Official A, interview) while in the National Flood Forum the 13-14 crisis response was described as ‘phenomenal, thousands and thousands of people weren’t flooded due to improvements. Not many more were flooded than in a normal year. In terms of an exercise in flood management, it was incredibly successful in unprecedented circumstances’ (NFF Chief Executive, interview).

Instrumental Learning in Australia

The Victoria Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC) also produced a great deal of instrumental learning. The standout theme in this regard also relates to warnings; this time, however, an enhanced system for communicating bushfire warnings to at-risk communities was said to be a major improvement to emerge from the VBRC. Indeed, this was ubiquitously cited by all interviewees as the positive change that materialised as a consequence of this Commission. This consensus is noteworthy because even those who were critical of the way that the Commission went about its business referred to more effective fire warnings as an aspect of learning that had reduced the vulnerability of Victorian communities to bushfire.
Within Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), the organisation now responsible for bushfire response policy, these changes were clearly associated with the VBRC:

If you want the community to react you've got to be able to provide them information that's timely, relevant and tailored. If you think about primacy of life and putting information to communities, those two principles in our new control priorities were the game changers. Then it was about putting community centre because that was a criticism in the Royal Commission, a huge criticism in the Royal Commission, that we weren't focused on getting information out and did not relate to the community. (Craig Lapsley, Victoria Emergency Management Commissioner, interview)

Enhanced bushfire warnings were also directly connected to tangible improvements in emergency response. One policy official in the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), for example, reflected on the complexity associated with connecting inquiry recommendations to policy outcomes and suggested in the end that:

You can draw a line of sight between a lot of the individual recommendations and suggest that they are likely to have achieved better public safety outcomes. I don't think with a lot of them there's a discipline yet to show that; to actually prove that there are better public safety outcomes but I think you can in terms of better warnings and information (DELWP Official A, interview, original emphasis)

The Victorian Government's decision to use evacuation as a new policy instrument also shows us how instrumental learning can actually facilitate crisis management gains. The official responsible for the VBRC implementation process, for example, echoed the views found in the UK case when she stressed that the Commission provided impetus and authority to a proposal that was contentious:

This thing about evacuation was one of the really good examples of where we modified operational practice and guidance after significant internal debate and discussion and some initial resistance as to its applicability in Victoria. Ultimately it was accepted and it was enacted specifically, as in our last fire season, very, very effectively. (Former Department of Justice Official A, interview)

As the quote above illustrates these instruments have also been tested during subsequent emergencies. The 2012-13 and 2013-14 fire seasons involved a significant number of serious bushfires. The Bushfire Royal Commission Implementation Monitor appraised the state's response to these fires, highlighting that 'public information, warnings and advice are now far more comprehensive and concise than they were on Black Saturday' (BRCIM 2014: 14) and that the state's first full evacuation of an at-risk community (Halls Gap in January 2014) was a success (ibid: 7). Interviewees, however, tended to focus on another significant bushfire that emerged in the south of the state more recently. In the Wye River and Separation Creek region a number of fires threatened life and property during the 2015 Christmas
holiday. There was a clear view within the data that the response to this fire highlighted warnings and evacuation working well:

It was Christmas day. We lost 116 houses at Wye River and Separation Creek, which is a major beachside resort area. Really noteworthy through that whole exercise was that whole settlement was successfully evacuated. So given the primacy of life thing, which I think the Commission was absolutely right about, no one died. (Emergency Management Victoria Official A, interview)

Once again these views were validated outside of central government. In the emergency services it was recognised that the Wye river response had shown the effectiveness of ‘cascading, regimented and clear warnings’ (Victoria Police Commissioner, interview). In the independent Bushfire and Natural Hazards Research Centre, the changes to warnings were regarded as ‘important and substantial’ (BNHRC Official, interview) and in Victorian local government, officials with risk and crisis management duties also praised the emergency response:

Wye River earlier this year. No lives were lost. Nothing. I think the messaging from the state control centre through to the local brigades through to the general community worked really, really well. You could see that; you could see how well coordinated it was. Yes there was a lot of panic and those sorts of things, but no lives were lost. (Victoria Municipal Official A, interview)

Instrumental Learning in New Zealand

In New Zealand, instrumental learning has also taken place. The most important outcome from this has been the implementation of a rapid, post-earthquake building inspection system. The lessons prompting these changes were developed out of one of the central narratives connected to the CTV building collapse, which was that it had been inspected after the September 2010 earthquake and given a ‘green placard’. This signalled that the building could be occupied but that further inspection was required. However, this decision was said to have been interpreted as ‘a green light’ indicating instead that the building was completely safe. Its complete collapse in the February 2011 earthquake therefore was thought to have exposed a system that was poorly understood and often implemented inconsistently. The Commission subsequently proposed 50 detailed recommendations around post-earthquake building inspections and concluded that a new inspection system be institutionalised via legislation. What has emerged from government in response are a standardised series of policy instruments including a new ‘traffic light’ placard system, standardised usability assessment tools and a series of field guides for evaluators. These were accompanied by training tools designed to help local authorities implement the new system. The former MBIE official who took carriage of this dimension of the reform process confirmed the type of learning, argued that it had been a success but expressed frustration about its lack of legislative institutionalisation:
When I left MBIE, I had completed a manual, completed all the resource material and completed all the training material and produced two quite chunky field guides for staff and I was delighted as a former colleague said to me “we’ve all been trained and that material, it was great – it hit the spot”. To discover that people were being trained and that it was working was wonderful. It’s a good feeling but the thing is that, sadly, despite having the all-party agreement needed to change the law my policy colleagues haven’t got that into a law change. (Former MBIE Official A, interview)

This system was consistently cited as the most important outcome to emerge from the CERC thus far and, once again, positive views about this specific instrument materialised outside of government; in professional engineering bodies, building associations and local governments. One comment by a senior policy official with responsibility for building control in Christchurch illustrates this theme. Once again we see a view here that change has occurred but that the formal legislative reform process has been slower:

quite a few of the good things that have happened are the things that are happening outside of the formal Royal Commission legislative process. So the post-earthquake procedures for assessment - the traffic light system - that was recommended by the Royal Commission but it was outside the legislative change process and it actually happened. And to tell you the truth we now have probably about 200 people trained nationally from engineers to building officials to do building evaluations both commercial and residential and we also have probably a 20 tier management cadre that have been trained in managing that process. (Christchurch City Council Official A, interview)

The tests for this specific instrument occurred in July 2013 and November 2016 during which the capital city of Wellington was shaken by earthquakes that prompted the evacuation of its central business district. Policy officials confirmed that the system of building inspections implemented in Wellington after the 2013 shake was effective and had worked well. The November 2016 earthquake was much more significant. It measured 7.8 magnitude, killed two and damaged hundreds of buildings. Once again the Wellington CBD was evacuated and a series of buildings, some with significant damage, had to be inspected before being reopened. Initial media reports praised the post-building inspections (see, for example, The Guardian, 8 February) and these views were subsequently reinforced. Officials in MBIE (which is based in Wellington) and Wellington City Council both emphasised once again that the inspection system had worked well. However this was unusual event in that the city did not declare the earthquake officially as a disaster. This is an important point because the official declaration triggers the official inspection process. However in this event, Wellington relied on building owners and private engineers to conduct inspections while in other councils which were more substantially affected the official process was operationalised. Nevertheless, it was argued that both processes worked well because of the lessons that were learned via the CERC. One official, for example, provided an interview during the immediate aftermath:
No question, dramatic improvement. How have the assessments gone for this event? To give you an idea, by and large all the assessments for Wellington are already finished and this is the real positive; the recording system and the forms that were developed post-Canterbury worked really, really well and the assessments have been done really, really quickly … in other areas which did declare a state of emergency they are going through a civil defence and council inspection and placarding regime and those have been very successful. … The positive here though is that all of the private engineering firms, although they are not placarding the buildings, they are using the same forms and a lot of those engineers have been trained as part of MBIE’s training program and that’s worked well. (Wellington City Council Official, interview)

Instrumental Learning in Canada

The degree of instrumental learning that followed the SARS outbreak is quite astonishing. However, the one consistently cited improvement relates to epidemiological surveillance tools. Both the Walker Panel and the SARS Commission recommended that a new agency be created in the public health space and that it should take carriage of infectious disease control policy. As a consequence the Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion, now known simply as Public Health Ontario (PHO), was created. The ability of the PHO to produce sophisticated, science-driven epidemiological surveillance was repeatedly cited as a very clear example of how inquiry lessons could be connected to reductions in vulnerability. At the centre of these claims was a view that the province now had an enhanced capacity to provide timely laboratory testing, accurate incidence measurement and more effective surveillance reporting generally. This was said to have resulted in a situation where disease outbreaks occurring elsewhere could be monitored, new infectious disease could be identified clearly when they did arrive and that they could be subsequently tracked much more effectively should they escalate. As far as the Province’s Cabinet Secretary was concerned, this was a significant gain to emerge from the SARS Commission:

Surveillance, data and infection control. The true story of SARS that is very graphic is of public health officials trying to track cases using a system of coloured ‘stickys’ on walls – paper and pencil stuff – and there was not a broad enough provincial capacity or architecture for holding data of that sort and for rapidly tracing where cases were ending up and tracking them back to source. That was being done by paper and pencil so in terms of lessons learned and things that are, for the most part, fixed; the capacity for case tracking is top of mind for me because that capacity was pretty non-existent. (Tony Dean, interview)

Unsurprisingly, officials within PHO were happy to support a suggestion that the creation of their organisation had enhanced surveillance capacity and consequentially reduced vulnerability to future disease outbreak. However, once again, the views of government and the agencies were validated by interviewees who were independent. Dr. David Walker, for example, who not only chaired the SARS Expert Panel but who has also investigated the performance of the subsequent policy reforms, cited increased surveillance capacity as one of the key benefits to emerge from the creation PHO (David Walker, interview). At the
local level, public health officials praised the PHO’s willingness to provide them with surveillance data and information that catered to local needs (Regional Public Health Official A interview) and in the Registered Nurses Association, the PHO’s ability to provide more accurate incidence measurement was seen as one element of a suite of reforms that had enhanced clarity around outbreaks in ways which were thought to beneficial.

The province of Ontario has been tested by multiple outbreaks of one kind or another since SARS. These include H1N1, Legionnaires Disease and a significant Ebola scare. H1N1 stood out for most interviewees as a clear example of instrumental learning enhancing resilience to a future threat. In 2009, a swine-origin variant of influenza H1N1 grew into a pandemic killing over 17,000 across the globe. Ontario’s response to H1N1 was said to have reflected an effectiveness that could be traced to the SARS lesson learning period and the Commission in particular. In the public domain, for example, new investments in laboratory capacity and more effective surveillance tools were repeatedly cited as evidence of SARS learning. Ministers, public health officers and a wide range of independent observers can all be found on the public record, praising the improvements in surveillance in relation to H1N1 (see, for example, Toronto Star 2009; Toronto Star 2009s). Similar views were expressed again in relation to the Province’s 2014 response to the potential threat of Ebola (Calgary News 2014) and of course, these views were echoed in interviews. The Chief Medical Officer for Public Health in Ontario, for example, underlined how much had changed since SARS and how that had an impact during H1N1 and a Listeriosis outbreak that preceded it:

As we progressed over time the traditional public health surveillance which was very much about qualitative first case reporting, backed up slowly by laboratory testing and the usual gumshoe work, which is arduous and time consuming when it comes to identifying a cause, we improved that system to such an extent that during the Listeriosis case we identified a provincial outbreak before a local outbreak because we were so exact and then you ramp up resources even faster. … we have such sensitivity now that we can pick things up early but we also have specificity now too. So the pandemic. We did intense surveillance and rapid laboratory testing of the initial clusters and we were the first ones worldwide to identify that people who were born before 1957 had a significant immunity to this novel pandemic. That meant we could step back and breathe as we knew that a large proportion of the elderly would not be dying. That breath gives you focus, you work on your coordination, your communication and we were successful (David Williams, Chief Medical Officer for Public Health, interview)

The evidence presented above shows quite clearly that that the post-crisis inquiry is an effective means of engaging in instrumental policy learning, that the lessons that inquiries identify in this regard are regularly implemented and, most importantly, that the creation of new instruments enhance our resilience to future threats. What we have therefore is significant evidence through which we can challenge the conventional view that inquiries are an irrelevance to policy learning and reform. This challenge only gets stronger when we examine organisational policy learning.
Cognitive Organisational Learning

In the sections above we typified a form of learning based around the enhancement of collective action, which it was argued could be realised either through improvements in shared understanding or more effective cooperative action. These two improvements were described as cognitive organisational learning – when the shared cognitive capacities of an organisational group grew – and behavioural organisational learning – when altered cognition changed organisational routines or institutions in ways which enhanced collective working.

In three of the cases, significant evidence of cognitive organisational learning was found. This was defined through the claims of actors who emphasized that they had become more aware of their policy community, their place within it and ways in which they had to work alongside others to achieve collective crisis management outcomes as a consequence of an inquiry. This data resonates strongly with Etheredge and Short’s (1983: 48) classic view of policy learning as a means of generating ‘collective institutional coherence’. Moreover in all three crises when this form of cognitive learning was described, it was connected with specific behavioural changes through which agencies coordinated joint-action more effectively. Thus inquiries encouraged gains in inter-organisational understanding, which in turn facilitated gains in collective action. These are the hallmarks of organisational learning.

What is also remarkable in this area is that each inquiry viewed coordination problems primarily through the lens of leadership. Consequentially, each inquiry chose to create new offices or to strengthen the authority of pre-existing ones so that shared awareness could be strengthened leadership. Thus new leaders were created, given clear crisis management responsibilities and subsequently became inquiry ‘champions’ in their respective policy spaces.

Organisational Learning in Australia

In Victoria, the VBRC identified issues in central command and control, interoperability between emergency services and disconnects between the state and federal tiers of government (VBRC Final Report Summary, 2010: 8-10). As a consequence it proposed that an independent Fire Services Commissioner be created, made accountable to the Victorian Parliament and mandated with the responsibility of ensuring interoperability in fire response. The establishment of this office, which later broadened out to become the Emergency Management Commissioner was validated as a lesson-learned which had brought together the central emergency management community in Victoria. According to the Bushfire Commission’s Independent Monitor, for example:

It was the creation of that role which for the first time really drew together a central point of authority and control. You may recall that one of the key issues that came out of the Royal Commission was the question of who was in charge at critical times during the fire, and because no one was clearly designated as the person in charge that allowed some of the shortcomings that were reported on to occur. So to me, all of the other things - there are many things that contributed; infrastructure, technology but the real thing, I think, that makes a difference is having that central effective coordination so everyone knows who’s in charge at any given time and
where they should go for high-level decision-making. (Neil Comrie, Bushfire Implementation Monitor, interview)

The metamorphosis of the Fire Commissioner into the Emergency Management Commissioner was accompanied by the creation of Emergency Management Victoria. This is now the central coordinating mechanism for crisis management policy. At the centre of its efforts is the concept of consequence management, which is a concept that appears repeatedly in the Australian data. Consequence management involves tracing the ripple effect of a crisis beyond the immediate priorities of emergency management and crisis resolution. It means anticipating how an event will channel through and shape-shift across systemic interdependencies and once that tracking has been done, bringing the relevant agencies to the table as part of a planning process. This concept has allowed the central emergency services to take huge strides in terms of cognitive organisational learning. Indeed, as one police commissioner confirmed, this form of policy learning has changed the emergency management policy space in Victoria:

from a largely unsophisticated approach with silos to a joined-up one with everyone having responsibility. From an operational perspective what that meant in reality was you had not just a focus on putting the fire out but real consequence management. That meant at the table you now, as part of the emergency management team, you now have transport, education, water, electricity, tourism and from a messaging perspective, what that means to all of that. … So you now have a huge shared responsibility. (Victoria Police Commissioner, interview)

Thus what we have in Australia is an inquiry concerned about fragmentation, recommending a specific office to remedy that and thereafter a steady evolution of actors, offices and concepts orientating more and more around each other at the central government level. This is inquiry-driven cognitive and behavioural organisational learning in action.

Organisational Learning in Canada

In a similar vein, the SARS Commission also sought to improve coherence and shared understanding in a system which was said to be characterised by silos. The Province’s Cabinet Secretary at that time recalled:

We had silos baked into the architectural design of the public health system and within that we had live disputes between individuals, tussles for power, in the context of the crisis itself. … That was a stark issue, watching people argue across organisational silos and argue about turf and that was true between individuals and it was true with the province vis-à-vis federal government and it was true in terms of determining what the emergency management people were responsible for versus the Chief Medical Officer of Health and all of this was happening in real time. I have a considerable degree of confidence that you wouldn’t see that repeated again as a result of this inquiry and those reports (Tony Dean, interview, emphasis added)

Like the VBRC, the SARS Commission attempted to cut through the morass of competing interests with a recommendation that a single office – the Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) – take
responsibility for all aspects of infectious disease planning and emergency response. Policy officials made the case that this was a key feature of the SARS Commission. It was prepared to challenge those interests and recommend reforms about that were not simply about the technical or operational elements of health policy:

I can remember the policy exercise of taking each one of Justice Campbell’s recommendations, where relevant to my area of government, doing the analysis, trying to determine the actions that we needed to follow and there are things which Ontario should be very proud of. We immediately amended the public health legislation – the Protection and Promotion Act – newly prescribing the powers and independence of the Chief Medical Officer of Health … those were things which can be directly traced back to Justice Campbell’s reports. The creation of new powers for the Chief Medical Officer to issue directives led to the coordination of communication and these were subsequently used in future events. (Public Health Ontario Official B, interview)

A second significant outcome in relation to inter-agency cohesion and collective appreciation relates to the connections that have been made in Ontario between disparate policy areas. Two are important. First is the connection that now exists between the practices and culture of emergency management and the practice of public health and emergency medicine. For one member of Public Health Ontario, this was the legacy of the SARS lesson learning period. When asked about the most important lesson that was learned from SARS, this official responded that:

Everything we knew about emergency management was developed in a totally different environment. It was developed in fire fighting or in security. The cultures are a hundred and eighty degrees apart so we had to take those principles and start applying them and it was tough. … now public health organisations are using those principles even in small outbreaks and that’s now normalising. (Public Health Ontario Official C, interview)

Organisational Learning in the United Kingdom

The flood management system in the United Kingdom is fragmented across a large number of agencies who have very different concerns. The insurer prefers flood defence and prevention through infrastructure while scientific communities are now agreed that you can’t build your way out of a flood. River maintenance is seen as essential by many citizens but defined as problematic by environmental groups looking to conserve wilderness. Farmers want downstream drainage and urban dwellers want it upstream and economic development goals run against the precepts of risk management. In a context with so many competing goals and stakeholders a lack of inter-organisational understanding is, to some extent, inevitable. However, this lack of coherence played out in a disastrous fashion during the 2007 floods because ‘prior to Pitt there was the dreadful situation that when you were flooded and you rang for help the response was, it’s not our water, it’s not our flood’ (Pitt Engineering and Science Panellist A, interview). This was a point that was repeatedly acknowledged by the Pitt Review and a great deal of its pages are spent making the case that the system of flood management in the United Kingdom needed to
become more coherent and clear for all of those involved. Hence the Review’s guiding principles state that ‘we must be much clearer about who does what. … that people and organisations are held to account, structures are simple and outcomes are more certain’ and that the flood management community ‘must be willing to work together and share information. … the public interest is best served by closer cooperation and a presumption that information will be shared’ (Pitt 2008: x).

When this aspect of the review was raised with interviewees, there was a complete consensus that the coherency of the flood management system had improved as a consequence of Pitt-driven reforms. The principle way that this has been achieved is by designating the Environment Agency as the strategic lead for all forms of flooding in the United Kingdom and the County Local Authority as the lead agency for operational flood response. To a large extent, this has ameliorated the problem of different floods being owned by different agencies at the local level. Thus according to one policy stakeholder:

The absolute key to what Sir Michael Pitt said was that people have to work together and, pre-Pitt, what you had was a very disparate bunch of authorities that tended to work in isolation with each other. If it was the wrong colour of water, then it wasn’t your problem. Fundamentally, Pitt has banged everyone’s heads together and effectively said, “Come on everyone, you must all start to think and act collectively about water level management.” It is very difficult to dissociate land drainage with flood risk management, surface water with ground water and river flooding with tidal flooding, and so on. Pitt embraced the essence of the direction of travel needed and where we are now heading today. (Association of Drainage Authorities Official, interview)

Growths in inter-agency understanding at the local level were also underlined, crucially both in terms of local planning and local emergency flood response. In terms of the former, one official described his local authority as a unique place geographically:

where there's potential for groundwater flooding, there's potential for coastal tidal flooding, rain water, main rivers, drainage systems and the like, but each of the agencies were responsible for each of those sets of defences, if you like, they were not joined up. They only come together now through the lead local authority as it is now. And they were competing in some instances. There were actually schemes being developed by one agency which would significantly increase problems - operating running costs and the like - for another agency. So you now have all the bodies together and it's having that consistent communication with groups and bodies and having that practice of working together. (UK Local Government Official C, interview)

In a similar vein, another local authority official with responsibilities for flood response also argued that local government had become much more coordinated even though the Pitt Review did not propose large scale reform:

We’ve taken big strides since 2007 and the Pitt review in terms of response management. So it is more agile now and much more flexible in the way that we respond to emergencies … The multi-agency response is actually moving quickly now in order to make judgements and decisions and start the emergency response
earlier than perhaps previously was the case. So that word, “transparency,” you know, our understanding of what each of them is doing and what each of these levels and responsibilities are and the collective decision making that comes out of the local resilience forums are now much better. That wouldn't have happened naturally. (UK Local Government Official B, interview)

This evidence also reinforces a view that inquiries facilitate policy learning outcomes that enhance future crisis responses. Inquiries clearly encourage a disposition amongst policy actors to communicate and integrate more effectively with each other both in terms of pre-crisis planning and crisis when they do not the identification of coordination problems, the process of learning and the opportunity to reform are all likely to bring different groups to the table with a general willingness to learn about others. Thus inquiries help to lay the foundations of a permissive context within which cognitive organisational learning can occur and if their recommendations are followed it is likely that new or invigorated coordination ‘champions’ will be inserted into these contexts. These actors can capitalise on the momentum for change and produce the ‘hard’ components - the concepts, the tools and the architecture of coordination - that actually wire policy sectors together and then sell change to a policy communities.

**Conclusion**

In these four cases inquiries were convened, lessons were identified, assimilated into policy and the issues that plagued the previous crisis responses were not seen again. Thus we can say that inquiries have the capacity to produce policy learning outcomes which enhance resilience and reduce vulnerabilities to future threats. This principally occurred in these cases through the facilitation of instrumental forms of policy learning, which in the short to medium term equips a policy system with better crisis management tools, and cognitive organisational learning which produces greater levels of coordination across the medium to longer-term.

There are of course caveats. A cynical observer may choose, for example, to say that the subsequent emergencies that occurred after these inquiries did not presented the same level of threat as those events that prompted the inquiries in the first instance. That is entirely true. Those emergencies used above to test the inquiry reform were indeed ‘lesser’ in nature and, as a consequence, there is validity in an argument that suggests that these policy systems might be overwhelmed again by crises of a similar magnitude to the ‘big ones’ that encouraged their reform. In response, however, we need to acknowledge a number of issues. First it would also be inaccurate to categorise events like the global H1N1 pandemic or the 2013-14 Winter Floods in the UK as small-scale or routine in nature. They didn’t have the same impact as previous events but they were real, they were challenging and as such they represent appropriate contexts in which these inquiry-driven reforms can be evaluated. Second seasoned crisis management analysts know just how hard it can be to contain emergencies and stop them from escalating dramatically into bigger threats. Thus the very fact that they did not materialise into larger-scale problems is testament to good crisis management performance. Third, and most importantly, the core argument here is *not* that inquiries have the capacity to immunise policy systems completely from crises. The policy learning that took place in these policy systems in no way precludes another big crisis from overwhelming
them. To argue that would be to fail to understand the very essence of a crises. Thus prevention or even significant moderation of the ‘big ones’ is too much to hope for (or claim). Instead the evidence leads us to a much more modest place, albeit articulated emphatically with international evidence, which is simply that *post-crisis inquiries produce forms of policy learning which enhance resilience and reduce vulnerabilities to future threats.* In crisis management terms, this is probably as good as it gets.

To what extent can we take this finding and generalise it to all inquiries? Our cynical observer may now tell us that we have a strong finding but that it is only applicable to a sub-set of the phenomena in question. That is also true. We are obviously examining *post-crisis* inquiries and they are indeed different from others, not least because they follow events which can open up a permissive climate for policy change. Thus we will not claim that our findings can be extrapolated across to all other inquiries. Clearly there are limitations to the generalizability of the data presented above and these have to be acknowledged. However, showing that a sub-set of inquiries do not regularly find themselves on the shelf or in the dustbin is still significant, especially when we remind ourselves just how widespread (but unsubstantiated) the view to the contrary is. The near unanimity that accompanies the view that inquiries are inept at policy learning and weak at prompting change is therefore the very thing which accentuates our findings about the effectiveness of post-crisis inquiries. What this means is that those interested in inquiries have a choice. They can rope these findings off as something unique to the world of crisis and continue to criticise the ‘other’ inquiries on familiar grounds or, alternatively, they can question whether or not we now need to know more about those ‘other’ inquiries too as they may not be quite as ineffectual as conventional wisdom would have us believe. Either way, we cannot continue to make universal claims about the ineffectual nature of the inquiry. We need to revaluate.

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