Policy Learning and Institutional Memory
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Abstract
This paper begins with the argument that, contrary to much conventional wisdom, governments have a strong capacity to learn and reform in the wake of crises. Why is it then that we continue to see patterns in the causes of crises and the ways in which they are mismanaged? The paper locates one answer to this puzzle in the concept of institutional amnesia. The existence of amnesia suggests that governments are constantly learning but also constantly forgetting. Consequently, the challenge for governments after crises is not necessarily related to how they might achieve better policy learning but how they might remember the lessons that they have learned already. A first step towards addressing this challenge is to better understand the concept of institutional amnesia in the first instance and thereafter to define the variables that cause it. These steps will allow us to better prescribe solutions to memory loss. This paper contributes to this agenda. It draws on 100 interviews across four Westminster systems in order to suggest the ways in which we might conceptualise amnesia, the variables that facilitate memory loss and the means through which we might able to reduce the degree of amnesia within government.

Introduction
Patterns exist in the problems that policies seek to address. The existence of these patterns across time appears to offer compelling evidence of a deep-seated propensity in our policy systems to repeat the mistakes of the past. As a consequence, the critique that governments struggle to acquire and absorb new policy knowledge - to learn effectively - is commonplace (Dror 1986: 211; Leeuw et al. 1994: 2; Olsen and Peters 1996: 32; Weible and Sabatier 2007: 130). This is a particularly well-rehearsed argument amongst those who study crises and crisis management, who are often associated with a claim that the public inquiry is not a particularly effective mechanism when it comes to lesson learning and reform (see, for example, Boin et al. 2008: 13; Elliott and Macpherson 2010: 574; Drennan et al. 2015: 193). Thus history repeats and the mistakes of the past continue because of policy learning failures. Our starting point for this paper is a rejection of those claims. Drawing on four international cases of post-crisis policy learning in Westminster systems, Stark (forthcoming) has shown that: 1) valid lessons are regularly identified by public inquiries; 2) many of those lessons are well learned and well institutionalised within government, 3) that a majority of different policy actors agree that resilience to future crises improved as a consequence, and; 4) that in subsequent crises these reforms enhanced policy effectiveness. In short, Stark’s work shows that governments can learn after crises and that this learning can prevent the mistakes of the past from resurfacing.
However, while findings of this nature may be music to the ears of inquiry chairs, sponsoring ministers and implementing bureaucrats, they do not in any way help us unravel the puzzle of why we continue to see patterns across time both in the causes of crises and their mismanagement. If governments are learning successfully about crises in their wake and are implementing reform agendas that are effective, we would expect those patterns to disappear. Yet they do not. *This paper locates one significant explanation for this in the concept of institutional amnesia* (Pollitt 2000). The key claim in this regard is straightforward. After crises, lessons are learned by government, hardwired into policy and institutions and memorialised through the narratives of political and bureaucratic agents. However, learned lessons are immediately vulnerable to multiple kinds of amnesia which erode institutional memory. Thus it is *not* correct to say that ‘history repeats’ because governments cannot learn or change after crises. *They simply forget what they have been taught.*

Although logical, this argument is hardly novel. Nevertheless, it bears repeating because commentators continue to vilify governments because of their inability to learn when in actual fact they would be better criticising their capacity to remember. This argument becomes more important when we think in normative terms about the ways in which policy learning ought to be improved. To misdiagnose is to mistreat. Therefore we need to emphasise that improvements in learning can be made by concentrating on the ways in which we might enhance memory rather than lesson learning per se. This is where the value of this paper primarily resides. We begin with the blunt claim that public sector bodies are amnesiacs but we seek to add value through a conceptual and empirical exploration of institutional memory and amnesia in four Westminster systems. This is the real focus because if we want to develop prescriptions for memory loss then we need to first get to grips with what amnesia is in the first instance and thereafter understand the pathologies through which it emerges.

In order to do this, the paper explores amnesia through a cross country case comparison of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. This comparison analysed the extent to which public inquiries can be considered to be an effective mechanism of post-crisis learning. Four inquiries were chosen as part of the study: the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission; the SARS Commission; the Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission, and; the Pitt Review. The intention was to examine their influence in terms of policy learning and also to better understand what policy learning looked like in relation to inquiries in the twenty-first century. The project drew upon data from 100 interviews with inquiry members, ministers, policy officials and various policy stakeholders. The research design for the project was inductive. It therefore sought to explore the issues in a broad manner with an elastic organising framework. As a consequence the issue of institutional amnesia emerged through a study that was predominantly concerned with other issues and, in that process, *all 100 interviewees ubiquitously acknowledged the issue of institutional memory as a problem for lesson learning.* This consensus was startling and is an important finding in itself. However, the real value of the data that emerged from this aspect of project can be found in a number of themes, which help us better
conceptualise institutional amnesia, its causes and what we might be able to do to prevent memory loss in the future. The remainder of the paper will work through these themes.

**The Concept of Amnesia: A Structural and an Agential Issue**

Our first point is conceptual. Memory and amnesia can be understood through a structure-agency dialectic at the organisational level. Of course, the structure and agency relationship is a well-worn component of political scientist’s tool-kit. The dialectic, however, has become fashionable again recently in studies of policy, governance and political economy as scholars have returned to it to, updated it and used it to explain institutional change in various ways (a good sample here might include Bevir and Rhodes (2010) work on traditions; Streeck and Thelen’s (2005) work on incremental change and Bell’s (2011) agents-in-context approach). The commonality in each of these works is their reliance on the relationship between an agent and the immediate environment within which they operate as a means of understanding change. These two elements can also form the basis of an understanding of institutional memory and, consequentially, institutional amnesia. Consider, as an introduction, Barbara Levitt and James March’s (1988) seminal definition of organisational learning:

> 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 of organisational learning (see also, 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 individuals. It can be considered autonomous in the sense that it owns ‘a memory’ which can grow and decline through adaptations that are beyond any one single agent. This memory can be understood as the cumulative result of a host of ‘hard’ organisational components ‘such as formal rules and structures, policy documents, manuals, standard operating procedures, and computer-based information systems or implicit forms, such as organizational routines, codes, norms and beliefs’ (Dekker and Hansén 2004: 217). Taken together such components can be considered to be the elements that constitute the structural environment within which organisational members operate. For Levitt and March therefore, to learn was to institutionalise lessons over the longer-term by hardwiring lessons into organisational structure. However, this only represents one half of the structure-agency equation because, as Linde’s (2009) analysis of institutional memory shows, remembering in an organisational context is also about narrative, storytelling, and the memorialised symbols through which an organisation’s speaks to its own identity. Thus:
people within institutions do not mechanically record and reproduce the past. Rather, they work the past, re-presenting it each time in new but related ways for a particular purpose, in a particular form that uses the past to create a particular desired present and future. These forms of representation of the past are not identical, but their differences themselves are important to study. (Linde 2009: 14)

The key point for us here is that memory works is articulated through individual agents who hold, transmit and adapt narratives. Agential narratives are thus the second element in the structure-agency dialectic that influences memory. Thus we can present institutional memory conceptually as a combination of hard structure and soft storytelling. This was a point that was well articulated in Canada within Public Health Ontario, the organisation that was created in the wake of SARS, by a policy official who was discussing gains made via the SARS Commission.

Connectivity is not a constant; it is fluid so as people transfer out of their roles there is often a loss of corporate memory, governments change and their memory of the issues that we faced is lost. Ministers change, policy staff change, the bureaucracy turns over within a certain time period and so coordination capacity increases in the immediate aftermath of a crisis but it then follows a downward slope thereafter because of transitions that are inherent to our organisations. New structures help up to a point but at the end of the day, if all the people change and if they have no corporate memory, the structure alone won't hold lessons (Public Health Ontario Official B, interview, emphasis added)

This view is an excellent introduction to the issue of amnesia generally because it shows how gains made via inquiries (in this case better coordination) are easily eroded by problems of memory. It also highlights the structure-agency relationship within the concept effectively too by showing that organisational structures and procedures alone cannot hold memory. Agents are also required to recall the history and the narratives that create those structures in the first instance. This is an important point because if agents forget the narrative or the story changes significantly, then the rationale for the ‘hard’ organisational components which encode the lessons from the past will be lost. In other words, legitimising narratives are required to speak on behalf of organisational components, particularly if their worth is not immediately apparent. Over time such components will increasingly be questioned. They will be dismantled if there is no story to be told about their creation and worth.

The importance of understanding memory and amnesia in terms of a structure-agency relationship rests upon the fact that the agential-narrative dimension of the dialectic is often ignored. The view seems to be that people come and go but organisational routines can last much longer. As a consequence no effort is made (at least intentionally) to keep lesson learning narratives alive. One prescription for counteracting amnesia can therefore be found in attempts to interleaves historical narratives around institutional routines because storytelling about the crisis and the inquiry lessons that initially legitimised and justified those routines can protect them. This can happen in a number of ways. Corporate governance documents often
refer to crises narratives if they were a significant influence over the organisation, plaques and memorials can be found in receptions, buildings, committees and sub units can commemorate events through their names and constitutions and the incumbents of offices can recall that their very positions emerge from tragedy.

The SARS lesson learning process reflects this vividly. Not only have the lessons from SARS been hardwired into policy, legislation and organisational routines but if one walks into the offices of Public Health Ontario, the organisation created through the lesson learning process, one is immediately confronted by memorials of the crisis. The PHO’s building is named after the Chief Medical Officer who led the lesson learning response, its laboratories are named after a microbiologist who played a prominent role in the SARS response and there are tributes to the people who lost their lives in its reception. Such memorialisation is complemented by the key governance documents of the organisation, which continually reference the outbreak and the learnings which created them.

In this regard, to return to March and Levitt’s nomenclature, understanding memory means conceptualising it in terms of a structure-agency combination in which history is encoded in organisational structures and the stories that exist behind the history. Thus dealing with amnesia means hardwiring lessons into organisational routines and ensure that those lessons are justified through storytelling. Government organisations, if anything, pay attention to the former and seem to neglect the latter. However, it is not enough to identify lessons and institutionalise them, we also have to plan to remember them, through agency narratives, across the long-term.

The Variables that Create Amnesia
Conceptualising memory in terms of agency narratives and structural-organisational components also allows us to better understand the dynamics which influence amnesia. Comparison of the cases revealed seven variables that influenced the extent to which each inquiry’s lessons were either forgotten or kept alive. Through these we can better understand how to combat amnesia.

The first variable that affects memory has nothing to with inquiries or public policy. It is the nature of the risk itself. In three out of four of these cases, lesson learning related to hazards which appear with regularity. This means that they stay on political and policy agendas across the longer-term. Thus the Pitt Review lessons are kept alive by repeated winter flooding in the UK, the Victoria Bushfires Royal Commission remains pertinent in Victoria because they suffer bushfires every year and, post SARS, the province of Ontario has had to deal with outbreaks of Legionnaires disease, H1N1 and an Ebola scare amongst other things. These lesser emergencies remind the public of the risk posed by the specific hazard, keep public officials on alert and remind political leaders of the risks associated with deprioritising the lessons of the last big event. In this regard, constant agenda cycles ensure that the narrative behind the issue never goes silent. Officials need to constantly remind each other ‘to be on their toes’ as Sir Michael Pitt explained in relation to floods:
I think it's inevitable that these things have a life cycle. All of these things are like rockets and missiles firing up into the air, big explosion, and then they slowly fall down to Earth again. It's a bit like that, and I think the life cycle of the Review has to be limited at some stage. But in a way, God's on our side because floods keep happening, they're not going to go away, global warming is happening. It will get worse rather than better. Most people understand that and it keeps everybody on their toes. (Sir Michael Pitt, interview)

In New Zealand, however, one has to go back to 1931 to find a case that is analogous to the 2010-11 earthquakes. Smaller-scale quakes have happened since 2011 but such a long period between significant earthquakes obviously means that lessons are forgotten as the issue dissipates from the public arena, as one inquiry chair noted wryly, ‘there is nothing better than a little scare from time to time, so one gets a little push and we all make sure we are doing the right things’ (David Walker, interview).

The second variable affecting memory is the extent to which an inquiry itself can encourage lessons to be institutionalised within a policy system. As one SARS interviewee noted ‘the extent to which you can institutionalise the change will affect how long it will last despite turnover. If the institutional capacity remains, then memory continues and programs can go on and on but it’s getting things institutionalised, that’s the trick’ (Public Health Ontario Board Member, interview). Inquiries can help pull off this trick. They therefore show the ways in which we can initially hardwire lessons into structure so that they might have a legacy. One clear way of ensuring some degree of institutionalisation in the first instance, for example, is to connect lessons learned with specific leadership and oversight mechanisms. The Pitt Review, for example, attempted to combat the early onset of amnesia by recommending a series of leadership initiatives that could shepherd the reform process effectively. These included a national cabinet committee for flood management, greater parliamentary scrutiny of the policy area, a national resilience forum for non-governmental actors, and more responsibility and accountability at the local government level (The Pitt Review, 2008: 405). Interestingly, however, this is one of the few areas in which the Pitt recommendations were not implemented. No cabinet committee was ever convened, for example, and the national resilience forum was never established. However, according to local government officials, Pitt’s emphasis on leadership and accountability at the local level has enhanced their institutional memory:

the longer you go without a major incident, the corporate memory is just sort of lost. So it is important to keep it in the mind’s eye, but in terms of the authority that I work for, the biggest consciousness of flood mitigation is through our responsibility as the lead local flood risk management authority and through that work, there’s a number of groups that have been set up with a strategic flood risk management view… and there’s also a scrutiny process within the local authority so there are ways in which it's kept in the consciousness. (UK Local Government Official B, interview)
The Victoria Bushfires Royal Commission also stands out in this area because of its recommendation that an independent Implementation Monitor be established to oversee the reform agenda. Policy officials within the Victorian government confirmed that this ensured that lessons have been implemented and then institutionalised across the medium to long term. Moreover the outputs of the Implementation Monitor - a series of detailed reports which audited the implementation process across four years - were described by public officials as a key resource which could be used for knowledge recall purposes. As far as the official in charge of the reform process was concerned, for example, the Monitor’s reports represented ‘the aide memoir for everyone in an enduring way’ (Former Department of Justice Official A, interview):

the Monitor was a good thing. Inquiries come and go, departments and agencies endure them, there’s a bit of flurry in the initial aftermath and then it all just dissipates and disappears and there was even evidence before the Commission of that from past events. So in terms of accounting to the public and actually driving sustained effort, I think it was quite effective. (Emergency Management Victoria Official A, interview)

Hence inquiries can create mechanisms that will ensure that their lessons are actually institutionalised in the first instance and this can keep them alive, at least across the short-to-medium term. This means they have a greater chance of being hardwired into policy, legislation and organisational components across the long-term. Not to attempt to do this, in a world characterised by fast paced change, seems odd and, as the bushfires Implementation Monitor himself explained, it is likely to mean lessons are simply forgotten:

things can fall off the agenda very quickly. I think history proves that very clearly. I'll give you just a little example ... There was another Royal Commission into bushfire in Victoria in 1939 by Major-General Stretton. Now, he made one recommendation, which was that all children ought to be given some education in bushfire ... So that was 1939. It actually wasn't put in place until 2012 when it finally made its way onto the national curriculum. How can that be? It was because the Bushfires Royal Commission really spoke about community education again. Finally, something which someone identified in 1939 gets revisited and this time it's actually put in place. To me, that was just the stand-out of how something can fall off the agenda if someone's not pushing it. (Neil Comrie, Bushfire Implementation Monitor, interview)

The third variable is political amnesia. Inquiry lessons need political champions. In a context of short election cycles, shorter ministerial careers and rapidly fluctuating agendas, lesson learning priorities can be wilfully forgotten or simply lost in the fluctuations of zero-sum politics. The former head of the Ontarian public service summed up the issue succinctly in relation to SARS:

Governments in most commonwealth countries have four, maximum five, year terms. They want to do a lot in those four years and they want to have done enough to knock doors with when the election comes around in year four. Even big commissions like the SARS Commission, the 9/11 Commission, the Katrina inquiry with the big priority that presidents, prime ministers and provincial premiers give to
those commissions, eventually it subsides from public and political and media view and in some respect Commissions are about putting closure on an issue and eventually that means other issues, concerns and priorities will overtake and maybe that is amnesia but its maybe better to describe it as a process where new distractions take over as the media lens shifts. (Tony Dean, interview)

The Pitt Review is again illustrative here. Although all agreed that Pitt was well implemented and that two different governments took its lessons seriously, concerns were repeatedly raised about the short-term amnesia of elected politicians, which was said to be reflected in a cycle of flood management spending. This was a popular narrative in the media and in Parliament during the Pitt Review’s implementation (BBC 2010; The Guardian 2012) and it escalated in the aftermath of the 2013-14 winter floods (BBC 2014; The Guardian 2014). Unsurprisingly, therefore, negative views about the wilful amnesia of elected politicians and their willingness to de-prioritise the Pitt reform agenda were widespread in the UK flood management community. Lord Smith, the Chairman of the Environment Agency at the time, for example, stated that good lessons had been identified by Pitt and that in the Agency:

the work is done. We have all the plans, they're very clearly in place, we know where the priorities are, we know what needs to be done, the problem is the funding and what tends to happen is in the immediate aftermath of a flood, governments put more money in for building flood defences, that then tails off, there's another flood, they put more money in, and that then tails off, and they put more money in and it's a rollercoaster. (Lord Smith, interview)

The need to stabilise funding in the quiet times can only be achieved by maintaining the issue on the political agenda over long periods. This has proved to be impossible in the United Kingdom. During the summer months, drought is on the agenda in England and it is difficult to make the case for flood reforms. In the winter, when a major flood arrives it is said to facilitate knee-jerk politicking and short-term political promises that are quickly forgotten. In the words of one expert, this kind of ‘ambulance chasing and propping up impossible schemes that never get funded except in the heat of flood occurrences is to be resisted. … that’s amnesia; we see the same things, the same mistakes being made over and over again’ (Pitt Review, Science and Engineering Panellist B, interview). In this regard, history repeats itself quite simply because:

from a political viewpoint, memories fade very quickly and politicians are worried about the vote tonight at ten o’clock and the election in due course and what is actually happening now and when you are trying to drum up support for flood risk management work and the sun is shining – well why should they get excited about it? (ICE, Past President, interview).

This was confirmed by the minister responsible for the Pitt Review during the early periods of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-2015):
You’re right to talk about short memory spans because, in 2007 there were terrible floods, but when we came into government in 2010, we were facing a serious drought, and all our efforts leading up to 2012 were with the rising sense of alarm that we were dealing with one of the worst droughts in living memory. Then we were back into flooding in late 2012 and putting that right back up the agenda and people saying, why haven’t you implemented Pitt faster and why aren’t you spending more on flood defences? Now things are pretty dry, and if we have a dry autumn and a dry winter, we’ll be back in that short memory span again. (Richard Benyon MP, interview)

Thus lesson learning in this area has to be cognizant of the fact that ‘policies do go in circles, but largely because of politics’ (Former Environment Agency Official A, interview).

A fourth variable on memory is bureaucratic amnesia. Turnover and throughput of staff in government offices, particularly the central departments which take the lead on reforms, is a big issue for the survival of lessons. Officials who have given evidence to an inquiry do not forget it easily. It imbues them with an appreciation for risk because, as the Solicitor for Public Prosecutions in Victoria noted ‘when you've got to get on your hind legs and stand in the box and give evidence about what you did or didn't do and then be cross examined about it, it’s an awful experience for people, I accept that but boy, it focuses them for the future’ (John Cain, interview). Moreover, officials who have experienced the crisis itself or taken carriage of a post-crisis reform process are more likely to champion the ‘spirit’ of an inquiry long after the dust settles. These officials are the storytellers that are so essential when it comes to keeping memory alive. The loss of agents of this nature across the long-term means that knowledge recall becomes difficult because, while the institutionalised components of a learning process might remain, no one will remember their provenance and the fact that they were a response to a crisis. As a consequence they will be inherently vulnerable. Again, this means that attention needs to be given to how narratives of this nature can be kept alive in a context of bureaucratic churn. In New Zealand, for example, bureaucratic memory of the post-earthquake reform process was said to have been eroded by the creation of a new central department, the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), which took carriage of the Royal Commission’s reform agenda. The former Department of Building and Housing was subsumed in the creation of this large ministry. This led to the loss of officials who had appeared before the CERC and who had worked to facilitate its reforms and, moreover, it meant that building and housing had to operate within a wider economic policy space. Even in this context, however, agents could still be found championing the CERC, telling the narrative of the crisis and ensuring that the delivery program marched on. Within MBIE, for example, the official responsible for the reform process spoke about the difficulties of institutionalising lessons in a public sector prone to amnesia. For him, the Commission was a ‘touchstone’ or a ‘stake in the ground’ which he used to remind people about the importance of reform:
You know, there’s always a half-life to these things and other priorities come into the public’s mind. But this is something you can use like a touchstone - you can say “the Royal Commission said this – we’ve got to address it in some way… particularly when others haven’t been so involved in Canterbury and you’ve got new people coming in, new management priorities, but here we can say “no no, Royal Commission!” (MBIE Official B, interview)

What is also clear is that different types of bureaucratic organisation have different rates of memory loss. A broad rule of thumb appears to be that the more generalist the agency, the stronger their level of amnesia will be vis-à-vis lessons learned. Central agencies, such as cabinet offices and treasuries for example, were said to churn significantly as fast streaming officials move quickly through their ranks. This was described as a structural problem by one Cabinet Office official in the UK because ‘when it comes to information seeking behaviour they don’t have a tendency to reach back in time and ask; who’s done this before? So their first instinct – and they’re very intelligent capable people – is actually to resolve the problem from first principles relying very much on their own capabilities’ (Cabinet Official A, interview). What this means is that history is rewritten continuously as each new stream arrives to reinvent the wheel. Line departments, however, because of their concern for specific policy areas, often have a slightly slower loss of memory, because officials in these departments can ‘have an appetite to develop an understanding of their field, their broader profession, and the people at the local level with whom they need to interact’ (Cabinet Office Official A). Thus we see pockets of expertise in a churning central departmental world that forgets easily. Most institutional memory, however, was said to reside in the more technical agencies where significant expertise is required. In these organisations, generalists are less required, and officials are often from specialist professions. As a consequence churn is much reduced. In the cases examined here those agencies included Public Health Ontario; the Environment Agency and the MET Office in the United Kingdom; Emergency Management Victoria; and Standards New Zealand. In these bodies, knowledge recall is strong amongst agents and also well institutionalised into organisational processes. Indeed, these agencies often view the task of keeping memory alive as one of their core functions. In Victoria, for example, that task primarily falls to the Emergency Management Commissioner who was quite clear that recalling the lessons of the VBRC was one of his core competences:

I used to use the words - which a lot of people used to get annoyed with me about - “we’re not going back to 6 February ever”. Whatever you did on 6 February 2009, we’re never going back there. They look at me and I say, we’re not going back there. Some thought the Royal Commission would come and go. Some thought we’d go back to the 6 February because it was a pretty comfortable world because the agencies were by themselves doing what they wanted to do. No, no, no. I often say to them, we’re never going back to 6 February 2009. (Craig Lapsley, Victoria Emergency Commissioner, interview)
In the UK the Environment Agency was consistently cited as the organisation which had the strongest memory. According to its former Chairman, for example:

Within the expert agencies and within the Environment Agency, within the MET office, the institutional memory’s very clear because in many cases we are talking about career experts who have made a lifetime of flood risk management so the Director of Flood Risk Management at the EA, he’s been working on flood risk management for the EA and its predecessors for 20 or 30 years. There are bags of institutional memory entrained in him. But meanwhile politicians, governments, secretaries of state and even civil servants come and go. (Lord Smith, interview)

What this means is that the agency often has to recall lessons learned history when dealing with other organisations, such as DEFRA for example, that have shorter attention spans. This was often a source of frustration as one former agency official recalled:

memories are quite short, not so much in the Environment Agency as they are the technical people and the senior people hang around but looking at DEFRA and the population of the flood department, most of them were new when I was in my last role and we had to keep trying to educate people … with the fast track scheme they move people around every 18 months and you get huge churn and that means government is very reliant on the [executive] agencies but we couldn’t lobby for decisions. So we would give technical advice and DEFRA would take a policy decision without the experience and that could be frustrating (Former Environment Agency Official C, interview).

This need to educate transient colleagues who ‘were just passing’ through was also a constant issue raised by those with longer-term memory. One former president of the Institution of Civil Engineers, with significant experience in the flood management policy space, for example, regretted the loss of one Secretary of State:

because we had educated him to the point where he was just about to be useful. That was the story of my life. DEFRA ministers, none of them are committed to the long term. None of them that are there get an outcome. The staff change every two years, they’re allowed one little desk, there are no records kept. (ICE Past President, interview).

The fifth variable affecting memory is the nature of the policy area where lessons have to be embedded. In the case of flood management, bushfire safety and earthquake vulnerability, inquiry lessons have had to enter into complex regulatory systems relating to planning, building and the natural environment. A number of issues are important for the survival of post-crisis lessons in these complex regulatory environments. The scale and intricacy of pre-existing legislation is certainly one. Development planning is a good example here. Natural disasters encourage lessons which seek to use planning regimes to reduce risk through changes to the natural and built environment. However, planning regimes involve complicated legislation with a large number of instruments and these, in turn, create plans that then have to be implemented by multiple levels of
government. Opening up policy of this sort so that risk management lessons can be inserted into them is a difficult surgical procedure, which governments are often reluctant to attempt. It takes time and requires high levels of consultation because when legislative change is on the table, lobbying escalates as a range of interests, unconcerned with reducing risk, seek to advocate their own agendas. Thus lessons can be wilfully forgotten, overrun by other interests or, if implemented, they may simply be swallowed up in the dense thicket of planning policy. Moreover, regulatory regimes also have to balance multiple policy objectives through the calibration of risk-cost-benefit. In these equations, larger priorities often occupy the dominant positions in a policy’s hierarchy of goals. These larger priorities will reassert themselves after a crisis fades from the public arena, changing risk equations and downplaying risk management concerns. This occurs most strongly in policy areas where risk management is seen to sit in tension with economic growth and development. It is not a coincidence that lessons which impact upon housing markets, large-scale development decisions or public infrastructure have proved to be the hardest to institutionalise and retain in the UK, Australia and New Zealand.

Sixth, social memory is very susceptible to amnesia when it comes to inquiry lessons. Obviously, the general public are under no obligation to support the lessons of an inquiry, nor do they have any systematic means for encoding lessons into their routines. More broadly, the nature of crisis management as a policy concern reflects what May (2003) would call a policy without a public. In other words, crisis management policy doesn’t attract support or interest during ‘normal’ times unless it is amongst a small constituency of citizens who have directly suffered. What this means is that communities and individuals will struggle to acknowledge an inquiry’s lessons much less retain the memory of them unless they were specifically affected. As a consequence, inquiry lessons which try to engender community responsibility for crisis management are likely to be quickly forgotten. This is a very real concern in the current climate in which a great deal of policy attention is given to concepts of community resilience and shared responsibility as a means of managing risk. Indeed the fact that the public appear to be generally disinterested in lesson learning was a concern articulated in all of the cases but it was emphasised most strongly in Australia where it was believed that remote and peri-urban Victorian communities must, to some extent, take more responsibility for their own safety. Local agencies in Victoria repeatedly stressed that complacency to bushfire threat was becoming a growing problem in the region and that a lack of community memory, particularly in areas which did not experience Black Saturday, was increasing the risk from bushfire. One regional fire-fighter explained:

where do we get the significant losses of life? We get it on the peri-urban side of the population. Why the peri-urban? Because we have people moving who have never seen, smelled or touched fire and there has been a significant land change-over between the people who now live … I bet my bottom dollar that the same problems we had prior to 09 will still ensue there because they don’t come from that environment, they are moving into one of the world’s three highest fire risk areas for bushfire. (Country Fire Authority Official B, interview)
This data suggests that when lessons need to travel outside of policy systems altogether, they are still at risk of amnesia. Establishing shared responsibility for risk management is a tough task in the first instance. It requires nothing short of a remapping of the social contract between state and citizen in a policy area where citizens expect the state to fully protect them. Achieving this is a tough task. Adding to the obligations so that citizens also implement the lessons of an inquiry appears to be a herculean one. Thus social amnesia and complacency easily erode the memory of an inquiry.

Finally, the existence of advocacy groups or advocacy coalitions which support inquiry lessons are an important means through which they can be kept alive. In New Zealand, an advocacy coalition formed to ensure that the CERC’s lessons about falling unreinforced masonry, not included in the original reform legislation, were not forgotten. In the United Kingdom, non-governmental group such as the National Flood Forum support flood victims in ways which attempt to keep the Pitt Review’s social resilience agenda alive and, most notably, in Ontario nursing and other public sector unions have consistently championed the SARS Commission’s precautionary principle as a means of promoting the health and safety of workers. Ontario’s former Cabinet Secretary, for example, noted how the SARS Commission report was ‘frequently cited and the precautionary principle is frequently cited … it really did set the benchmark and advocates of public health or nursing professionals are not going to let this one go’ (Tony Dean, interview). In particular, the Ontario Nurses Association (ONA) was viewed by many different organisations as a key explanation as to why the particulars of the SARS Commission have not been forgotten. Indeed, a great deal of ONA’s advocacy work in the health and safety areas references the Commission’s evidence around the precautionary principle, and, as one ONA official explained it invigorates their advocacy work in relation to the Ontarian government and the hospitals themselves:

The whole Campbell inquiry has given us a lot more power to remind them when they slip, just remember what happened during SARS. We raise Justice Campbell’s report and the precautionary principle all the time … there isn’t a submission that we write that doesn’t reference Justice Campbell and remind people of that valued report. … We continue the fight by any means necessary and we always reference Campbell because it removed the barriers holding us back. (Ontario Nurses Association Official A, interview)

**Conclusion: Recognising Amnesia and Preventing Memory Loss**

Our most obvious point is that we need to acknowledge that forms of institutional amnesia are a significant threat to lesson learning gains. When problematic histories repeat, it is not necessarily because lesson learning has not occurred. It may be instead that we have learned and simply forgotten. The challenge, therefore, is quite clear at least in the context of learning about crises. We need to remember until the next crisis hits and the learning cycle begins again. In order to do this we need to try and improve the shelf-life of the ‘hard’
practices that encode the lessons of history and also the ‘soft’ narratives, communicated by agents, which explain and justify those practices in relation to history.

What is quite clear in relation to the institutionalising of lessons is that inquiries could do more to get their lessons encoded into long-term practices in the first instance. The Victoria Bushfires Royal Commission and the Pitt Review both provide best practice examples of how this can be done. Neither inquiry simply faded away once their reports were published. Instead they proposed recommendations through which their reform agenda was audited and government held to account for their leadership of the implementation process. These recommendations, of which the creation of an independent implementation monitor was the most innovative, were primarily orientated towards ensuring that their lessons got properly hardwired into government in the first instance. Thus one clear prescription is that inquiries should recommend the means of oversight through which the implementation of their reforms can be audited across the long-term. In particular, special consideration should be given to whether or not the VBRC’s implementation monitor model is a viable option as it has proved to be a significant asset in terms of the long-term institutionalisation of those lessons.

A second way in which amnesia can be challenged is via strong public service leadership. When reform ‘champions’ are created by inquiries they not only lead on the implementation of new practices but they also perpetuate the narratives of the crisis that justify those practices and their own authority in relation to them. Thus we can also recommend that inquiries should consider empowering or creating specific offices to act as reform champions and knowledge recall agents. Knowledge recall should not be left to chance in a context in which bureaucratic ‘churn’ is significant. The process through which lessons will be remembered should be properly planned out and specific actors should be given the task. When this planning occurs careful consideration needs to be given to organisational context because of the different rates of bureaucratic churn that we see in different organisations. Long-term reform champions, for example, are unlikely to be found in fast-paced central ministries but rather in the specialist agencies that are driven by expertise or even in well-institutionalised, but largely independent, advocacy groups.

While some of the lessons produced by these inquiries have been compromised by the dynamics noted above, many elements of the spirit and the detail of their lessons have been woven into the fabric of governments in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In each case, reforms have survived across multiple governments, often with different political stripes; lessons have been hardwired into policy systems through legislation and; in every case, despite churn and amnesia, lesson learning champions were found supporting the inquiries recommendations in different sectors, levels of government and organisations. In the UK, the spirit of the Pitt Review was said to be alive and well-remembered ‘as a bit of a lighthouse, a bit of a beacon’ within the flood management community (ADA Official A, interview). In Victoria the lessons in the Bushfire Royal Commission were described ‘as a benchmark used across Australia and New Zealand’ by different agencies who continue to ask ‘how are we tracking against these issues?’ (AFAC Official A, interview). In Ontario, the public health system, despite thirteen years passing, continues to remember the
lessons of SARS through the DNA of many of its organisations and even in New Zealand, where the reform
process has been slow-moving and complex, central policy officials continue to bang the drum for the
Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission lessons. These cases therefore show that important lessons can
be kept alive if sufficient attention is given to treating institutional amnesia.

In order to do so, however, effort has to be applied to remembering through organisational
structures and agents. As Jim March and Barbara Levitt highlighted, organisational learning takes place when
history is encoded into organisational routines in ways which capture the lesson but not the history (Levitt
and March 1988: 320). This is not enough, however. What the evidence presented above suggests is that
collective memory is enhanced more effectively when institutional routines encode lessons and when efforts
are made by agents to recall the history of the crisis and the learning that ensued. When historical narrative is
interleaved into institutional routines, lessons are difficult to forget.

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