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Government, Interest Groups and Policy Change

Jeremy Richardson
Nuffield College, Oxford

Much of the British and European literature on the role of interest groups in the policy process focuses on their participation in policy networks of various types. Possibly reflecting the original development of the policy community and policy network 'models' in the late 1970s, these approaches tend to emphasize stability and continuity – of both networks and policies. However, the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed much policy change and instability in most Western European states. In particular, some governments have adopted a more impositional policy style, and interest groups have learned to exploit the opportunities presented by a policy process which is increasingly characterized by multiple opportunity structures. This is especially the case following Europeanization of many policy sectors within the fifteen EU member states. The article focuses on the possible causes of policy change, including the importance of state power; changes in the behaviour of interest groups as they adjust to and exploit the opportunities presented by multi-arena policy-making; the impact of new policy fashions, reflecting knowledge and ideas which can act as a virus-like threat to existing policy communities.

1. Policy Communities and Policy Networks

Concepts and models in political science probably reflect the politics of the period in which they were first formulated. This is both unsurprising and desirable, as their utility is to help understand, explain, and even predict events in the real world. An ambition to develop concepts more applicable to the realities of post-war British politics was the foundation of the British origins of what is now termed the network approach.[1]

Humble British Origins: Analysing Stability

Until the late 1970s, the study of interest groups in Britain, though very well established from the 1950s onwards, tended to play a relatively minor role in British political science (Richardson, 1999). This all began to change in the late 1970s, however, with a shift in focus from the study of traditional institutions, towards a different world of power – essentially a post-parliamentary polity (Richardson and Jordan, 1979). As Judge later commented, the 'post-parliamentary' thesis was, for over a decade, a characterization which was largely unchallenged and found reflection in other important commentaries (Judge, 1993, p. 123). The core argument in the post-parliamentary thesis was that policy change generally took place only when the relevant 'policy community' agreed it was necessary and a consensus existed on the direction of change. As Judge noted, the policy community concept was descriptive rather than definitional (Judge, 1993); similarly Dowding has suggested that it was a metaphor rather than a model (Dowding, 1995). In fact, it had no great pretensions to being a new *theory* of British politics. Its purpose, as

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Judge observed, was to contrast established models of parliamentary and cabinet government with a new reality of governing (Judge, 1993). The strength of the empirical tradition in British political science carried the simple, unrefined, concept forward. As Judge comments, '… the concern for descriptive accuracy has led a whole generation of British scholars to follow …' (Judge, 1993, p. 121). This concern is still very much alive in the 1990s but is reflected in more systematic attempts to build theories around the network concept. (For British examples see Rhodes, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1996; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992; for other, more quantitative examples, see Knoke *et al.*, 1996; Pappi and Henning, 1993; for an excellent review see Thatcher, 1998.)

Nearly twenty years after the formulation of the 'post-parliamentary' thesis, the current emphasis on the notion of 'governance' appears to stress the very same tendencies. 'Governance' is seen as signifying:

> … a change in the meaning of government, referring to a *new* process of governing; or a *changed* condition of ordered rule; or the *new* method by which society is governed. I employ a stipulative definition; it refers to self-organizing, interorganizational networks … (Rhodes, 1997, p. 35, emphasis in the original)

The Achilles heel of these closely related concepts of policy community, policy networks and new governance is the implication of stable policies, as well as stable relationships and a stable membership. Thus, it was argued that:

> The logic of negotiation also suggests that policy-makers in both government and groups will share an interest in the avoidance of sudden policy change. Working together they will learn what kind of change is feasible and what would so embarrass other members of the 'system' as to be unproductive. (Jordan and Richardson, 1982, pp. 93–4)

Jordan later further emphasized both the stability of policy communities and the existence of *shared views*. He sees policy communities as:

> A special type of *stable* network, which has advantages in encouraging bargaining in policy resolution. In this language the policy network is a statement of shared interests in a policy problem: a policy community exists where there are effective shared 'community' views on the problem. *Where there are no such shared views no community exists*. (Jordan, 1990, p. 327, original emphasis)

The explicit assumption of stability of relations and stability of actor participation (almost exclusiveness) is evident in most attempts to refine the original policy community and policy network concepts. Thus, as Judge points out, Rhodes repeatedly states (Rhodes, 1985, p. 15; 1988, p. 78; 1990, p. 204; Rhodes and Marsh, 1992a, p. 182, 1992b, p. 13) that:

> policy communities are networks characterized by stability of relationships, continuity of a highly restrictive membership, vertical interdependence based upon shared delivery responsibilities and insulation from other networks and invariably from the general public (including Parliament). (Quoted by Judge, 1993, p. 122)

More recently, Rhodes has stressed that, amongst the six reasons that policy networks are important is the fact that 'they decide which issues will be included and excluded from the policy arena' (Rhodes, 1997, p. 34). Similarly, Marsh and Smith emphasize the agenda-setting role of networks. Thus '… tight policy networks persist, in large part, because they are characterized by a large degree of consensus, not necessarily on specific policy but rather on policy agenda, the boundaries of acceptable policy' (Marsh and Smith, 2000, p. 6). However, following Marsh and Rhodes they also stress the importance of both exogenous factors and the role of changes in actor behaviour (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992; Marsh and Smith, 2000, pp. 8–11). However, the role of networks still seems central as 'all such exogenous change is mediated through the understanding of agents and interpreted in the context of the structures, rules/norms and interpersonal relationships within the network' (Marsh and Smith, 2000, p. 9).

Shifts in Actor Behaviour

Our central thesis in this article is, however, that the picture of order and especially control which these characterizations of the policy process imply is at variance with the changing nature of policy making at both the national and supranational levels in Europe. Policy making within European states and at the European Union level is often much more fluid and unpredictable – and less controllable – than seems to be implied by enthusiasts of the network approach. Whilst there are undoubtedly policy communities and networks which exhibit both stability and exclusiveness and do control policy agendas, there appear to be counter-tendencies which lead to lack of control, policy instability, and unpredictable outcomes.

For example, the very success of policy community politics might be the cause of its erosion over time. As Heinz *et al*. observed in the USA, interest groups became more active in order to reduce their uncertainty. However, interest group activity begets yet more interest group activity thus increasing, not decreasing, uncertainty as the number of stakeholders increases. Interest groups 'by creating structures to control or adapt to uncertainty … have contributed to the development of a more complex and rapidly changing policy environment' (Heinz *et al.*, 1993, p. 371). Uncertainty is also increased for all stakeholders by the tendency for closer linkages between policy problems across different policy sectors. This can result in a degree of 'overcrowding' of each, hitherto autonomous, policy sector as stakeholders from other policy communities demand and get entry. Policy communities and networks may become linked in a rather messy and unpredictable chain of actors, who do not know each other well and who do not speak the same 'language'. Of special importance is that they may bring quite different 'policy frames' to the table, i.e. they have very different policy or cultural frames through which they view the real world (Schön and Rein, 1994; Fligstein, 1997). Such large and diverse collections of stakeholders may be a 'network' only in the very loosest of senses. They inhabit the same policy area or domain but only minimal interaction occurs.

This shift – from a world of policy-making characterized by tightly knit policy communities and/or well-structured and stable networks, to a more loosely 'organized' and therefore less predictable collection of stakeholders in 'issue networks' – was noted in the USA as early as the 1970s. In 1978 Heclo noted that policy

problems often escape the confined and exclusive 'worlds' of professionals and are resolved in a much looser configuration of participants in the policy process. Heclo argued that the nature of power in Washington had begun to change. Exercising power was not as much fun as it used to be in the 'clubby' days of Washington politics (Heclo, 1978, p. 94). Thus 'as proliferating groups have claimed a stake and clamoured for a place in the policy process, they have helped diffuse the focus of political and administrative leadership' (Heclo, 1978, pp. 94–5).

In a now classic formulation, he argued that:

> Looking for the few who are powerful, we tend to overlook the many whose webs of influence provoke and guide the exercise of power. These webs, or what I will call 'issue networks', are particularly relevant to the highly intricate and confusing welfare policies … Increasingly, it is through networks of people who regard each other as knowledgeable, or at least as needing to be answered, that public policy issues tend to be refined, evidence debated, and alternative options worked out – *though rarely in any controlled, well-organized way*. (Heclo, 1978, pp. 102–3, emphasis added)

We dwell on Heclo's analysis simply because it focuses our attention so clearly on the core motivation for interest group participation – the need to acquire information (Austen-Smith and Wright, 1992, p. 231) about both the real world and the political opportunities for changing it. Assuming that interest organizations are rational actors (Christiansen and Rommetvedt, 1999, p. 210), participation in co-operative structures – be they policy communities, issue networks, or even looser configurations – is perfectly rational, even though its consequences may not necessarily reduce uncertainty. However, interest groups also have to deal with other actors in the policy process – especially governments. As Christiansen and Rommetvedt argue, 'powerful actors may choose to change institutions if they have the power to do so and if they calculate change to be in their favor' (Christiansen and Rommetvedt, 1999, p. 210). Governments can seize power over established institutions such as policy communities and networks. The British case, post-1979, seems to be such an example.

2. Britain: the shift from 'governing under pressure' to 'policy communities under pressure'

As an extreme example, Britain is an important test case of the capacity of network approaches to explain the process of policy change. In the British case it seems reasonable to argue that the consensual policy style was a clear enough feature of post-war politics (Beer, 1956; 1965). This is not to say that groups were never challenged by governments. However, confrontation and imposition was not the preferred policy style. It took Margaret Thatcher's succession of Conservative Governments to give policy community politics a real jolt as the new policy style unfolded. It is quite true, as Jordan and Maloney argue, that consultation with interest groups continued under the Thatcherite 'revolution'. However to argue, as they do, that '… consultation is the predominant policy making routine in British politics – a pattern scarcely touched by supposed Thatcherite antipathy to groups' (Jordan and Maloney, 1994), is misleading. It places insufficient emphasis on the extent to which the Conservatives systematically changed the underlying bases

of the consultations that they continued to conduct with the 'affected interests'. The consultations were often only after the extensive re-writing, by government, of old public policy 'franchises'. Consultation yes, but after what and on whose terms?

Mrs Thatcher and her leading ministers had their own ideas, policy frames, and policy preferences. The 1979 election was the start of a period of party and ministerial (though still post-parliamentary) government, not seen since the post-war Labour victory. Relatively few of the new policy ideas emanated from the plethora of embedded policy communities around Whitehall that had grown up in the post-war years. In many ways, the Thatcher Government's preference formation process became detached from the traditional post-war institutions of British policy making. The eighteen years (as it turned out) of Conservative rule saw major policy change across a very wide range of policy areas. It is difficult to accommodate this within any policy community or network 'model'. Hitherto stable and well 'regulated' (via public or private regulation) policy sectors were systematically destabilized by the Thatcher government, with resultant dissent from typically insider groups such as the British Medical Association and even the Confederation of British Industry. In essence, the old policy communities lost control of policy framing and agenda setting and had to react to agendas set by others.

Thus, as Peters suggests, governments may challenge existing networks (and create new ones) because existing networks may approximate the world of the 'joint decision trap' described by Scharpf (Peters, 1997, p. 57; Scharpf, 1988). Networks can easily produce decisions which are sub-optimal for society. In the face of lowest common denominator decisions, 'the role of government then becomes providing the leadership to shape the debate and move decisions away from that lowest common denominator realm into a more socially desirable space' (Peters, 1997, p. 57).

In Britain, by the mid-1980s, the balance of power had shifted decidedly in favour of government in terms of setting the agenda and initiating policy change. Thus, the policy process could often take on an *episodic* character – bouts of an impositional style as new policy ideas were introduced by the Government, followed by old style consultation via (often reconstructed) policy communities and networks (Maloney and Richardson, 1995).

It might be argued that Britain under Mrs Thatcher was unique in Western Europe and that there was no German, French, Italian or Scandinavian equivalent of 'handbagging' of policy communities by the governments. Certainly, it seems that Britain was special in the degree of governmental determination to push through tough reforms against resistance and in the sheer range of policy sectors that were subject to this process. However, it does seem that the kinds of pressures which helped the British governments to tackle the many reform deficits (themselves often testament to the accuracy of the policy community concept as a descriptive tool in the past) eventually spread to the rest of Western Europe. In many Western European states, a gradual shift in policy style also seems apparent, although usually in ways more subtle than Mrs Thatcher's handbagging approach. For examples from Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway and Sweden see Christiansen and Rommetvedt, 1999; Cole and Drake, 2000; Hewlett, 1998; Lequesne, 1993, 1996; Zohlnhofer, 1999; Della Salla, 1997; Dente, 1995; Radaelli, 1997, 1998; Micheletti, 1995.

The Norwegian and Danish cases are especially illustrative of the fact that, just as governments and bureaucracies have choice opportunities in their relations with other actors, so do the interests themselves. As Christiansen and Rommetvedt put it, in Norway and Denmark '… the institutional conditions of success have changed significantly during the last 25 years and particularly since the early 1980s … the relative power of the parliaments vis-à-vis ministers and administration has changed in favor of the former … under such conditions, rational actors will be more attentive to parliamentary actors in their pursuit of control and influence' (Christiansen and Rommetvedt, 1999, pp. 213–14). It is to the exercise of choice by interest groups, rather than governments, that we now turn.

3. Alternative venues as an interest group resource

When interest groups who are members of an existing policy community lose out, they have two basic choices. They can accept defeat on the issue at hand, hoping to win on another issue at some future date. This, after all, is the underlying logic of exchange relationships that sustain policy communities over time. In a continuous game, there is always hope of future gains that can balance current losses. However, other strategies are available if it appears that reliance on policy community politics is not delivering sufficient gains over time. A common strategy is to seek alternative 'venues' where policy-making can be influenced. Public policy-making is often carried out in several venues, each presenting a different package of costs and benefits to groups. Thus, there are incentives to abandon reliance on one stable and restricted policy community or network. We deal first with alternative national venues.

Alternative National Venues

As Baumgartner and Jones have demonstrated from their US case studies, established insider groups, well entrenched in long-standing policy communities which have delivered high returns for their investment in insider status, can eventually lose out to other groups who choose to operate in different 'venues' and who manage to construct a new 'image' of existing policy problems (Baumgartner and Jones, 1991). They argue that political actors are capable of strategic action by employing a dual strategy as follows:

> On the one hand, they try to control the prevailing image of the policy problem through the use of rhetoric, symbols and policy analysis. On the other hand, they try to alter the roster of participants who are involved in the issue by seeking out the most favorable venue for consideration of their issues. (Baumgartner and Jones, 1991, p. 1045)

Baumgartner and Jones see the interaction between image and venue as producing 'punctuated equilibrium', whereby a period of stability is replaced by one of rapid, dramatic and non-incremental change (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, p. 18). Policy change can result from a conscious rejection of the policy community approach to policy making – either by choice or necessity – on the part of interest groups. Fritschler's much earlier study of the politics of smoking in the USA produced similar findings. He argued that 'public interest politics uses the policy-making

powers of legislators, bureaucracies, and the courts in patterns of conflict inducing strategies (Fritschler, 1975, p. 3). The net result of this type of anti-policy community politics was that the tobacco sub-system in the USA was 'changed completely in eight years. The small group of people in Congress, in the agencies, and in the tobacco groups lost control of policy making processes' (Fritschler, 1975, p. 3).

A longitudinal study of trunk roads policy in Britain uncovered a similar phenomenon – namely, of the loss of power by an entrenched policy community (Dudley and Richardson, 1996; 1998). The pro-road lobby had the ideal stronghold in dominating the core policy-making arena centred on the Department of Transport (DTP). Beyond this apparently key venue, however, lay a potentially hazardous arena in the form of the Public Inquiry process for highways. In the 1970s, the environmental lobby was able to combine with local protest groups to embarrass the DTP at a number of Highway Inquiries. Not only did the opposition to major road schemes disrupt the DTP's specific plans, it also led to a public debate on the *values* underlying the trunk roads programme. For the first time, roads policy became public business, rather than the private management of public policy. The Highway Inquiry process became the venue where the two 'adversarial policy communities' fought (Dudley and Richardson, 1996). By selecting a more favourable venue, the environmental lobby exposed a weakness in the road lobby's historical domination of the policy process, and directed public attention to alternative transport policies. The environmental lobby was able to influence the policy system by at least changing the 'image' or 'framing' of transport policy problems, without gaining admittance to the core policy-making arena. Essentially, the discourse had shifted from a 1950s/60s perception of trunk road building as a solution to a problem, to a perception that trunk roads had become a problem to which we needed a solution. As in the case of smoking and nuclear energy policy in the USA, the changing politics of trunk roads policy in the UK had taken place outside (and despite) established policy communities that were thought to be hegemonic in their respective policy areas.

A similar example is provided by the current (1999/2000) campaign against genetically modified (GM) foods in Britain. The use of direct protest, on the roads model, has successfully shifted the debate from the closed world of scientific advisory bodies to the public domain. Not only has there been a venue shift, but the opponents of GM foods have begun to change the image of the GM issue. GM crops are increasingly seen not as a solution to many food supply and environmental problems of the world, but as a threat to both. The use of alternative national venues is not confined to what may be seen as outsider groups, however. The Countryside Alliance, in Britain, consists of some deeply entrenched interests (such as farming and land-owning) who have chosen to shift the focus of the campaign against the proposed ban on foxhunting from traditional forms of lobbying to a French-style programme of demonstrations and events. As Christiansen and Rommetvedt noted from the examples of Denmark and Sweden, even established interests may be forced to explore alternative arenas. Thus, if access to traditional corporatist institutions is restricted (for whatever reason), interest organization will exploit other channels of influence (Christiansen and Rommetvedt, 1999, p. 212). The Countryside Alliance is also engaged in an attempt to shift the image of countryside interests from that of a rather privileged

land-owning class to a somewhat oppressed and threatened minority, trying to defend a traditionally English way of life. The French case, of course, is the classic example of groups using alternative venues as a means of influencing public policy. Agricultural interest have traditionally used direct action successfully and have been joined more recently by lorry drivers who have used similar strategies to force policy concessions by governments. However, as Cole points out, the French tradition of direct action does not necessarily mean that groups are excluded from more conventional, lobbying strategies. He notes that 'for groups such as farmers, direct action tactics go alongside private negotiations between interest group representatives and state officials' (Cole, 1998, p. 200). Similarly, in Britain, Lord Melchett, Executive Director of Greenpeace, has argued that direct action and working within the system have always gone hand in hand (*Financial Times*, 15 February 2000). Other European examples of the successful use of alternative venues in the form of direct action include the ecology movement in Germany in the 1980s (Rüdig, 1988) and the so-called 'battle of the elms' in Stockholm in the early 1960s where environmental groups picketed the location of a new underground station in one of the city's main squares. By-passing existing structures in order to gain attention for new ideas and issues is, of course, a key part of the repertory of actions used by social movements (Tarrow, 1982; Rootes, 1999). The ecology movement seems particularly adept in its innovative approach to venues. For example, ecology groups are finding that their skill in using the internet – both to acquire information and to co-ordinate lobbying nationally and cross-nationally – is often greater than their traditional opponents. They are also increasingly adept at using the courts. For example, the *Financial Times* recently described a new breed of 'eco-yuppie'. The eco yuppies can achieve in pinstripes what others do in combat boots. As one of them (a 38-year old Oxford-educated barrister) remarked 'we are palpably respectable, we know our rights, we know the law, and we're not going to go away (*Financial Times,* 15 February 2000). An increasingly common phenomenon, however, is the extension of venue shopping *beyond* national borders. This is especially the case within the European Union.

The Politics of Uncertainty; Promiscuity and Mistrust in the EU

Our discussion so far has focused on national policy-making. For the fifteen member states in the European Union, however, the locus of policy-making for many policy areas has shifted to the European Union (EU). We need not delve into the somewhat sterile debate between neo-functionalists and intergovernmentalists (see Sandholtz and Stone Sweet, 1998; Moravcsik, 1998). Suffice to say that amongst scholars of the European Union almost all accept it as given that the EU policy process is best characterized as a multi-level, multi-arena, multi-venue game. Rather like the United States, the European Union provides a multitude of access points for policy professionals and interest groups of all kinds. (The word 'all' is used advisedly, here. Most of the evidence suggests that the EU policy system is very open indeed and that access to policy-making institutions and policy-makers is rarely a problem for interest groups). Interest groups from EU member states have some very effective alternative arenas or venues in which to play. These venues are attractive to those excluded (for whatever reason) from national policy communities, to those who receive insufficient pay-offs from their participation,

and even to those who remain active and successful participants in them. As we suggested earlier, interest groups are capable of making rational calculations concerning the allocation of lobbying resources as between possible lobbying targets – deciding which public institutions to lobby (Coen, 1997; 1998; Bennett, 1997; 1999) or deciding which individual legislators to bribe (Snyder, 1991). Increasingly, groups are aware of the potential gains from transnational lobbying. Indeed, in their study of what they term 'activists beyond borders', Keck and Sikkink lay great emphasis on the autonomy from states which transnational action can deliver to activists and interest groups (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p. 4). They are at pains to emphasize the open access to the international system that groups and activists have gained.

Within the EU, the Commission is an institution especially permeable to interest groups. Being so open to interest groups of all kinds strengthens the Commission's claim to legitimacy. It is also a useful way of avoiding the trap of receiving 'asymmetric' information if a limited range of interest groups is admitted to policy deliberations (for a discussion of lobbying and asymmetric information see Potters and van Winden, 1992). In many policy sectors in the EU, a 'push-pull effect' has been at work. The 'push' has come from the kinds of changes in national policy styles indicated above – a more active and impositional policy style from some national governments, often accompanied by a relentless resource squeeze. The 'pull' has been provided by the logic of the shift in the locus of power from national capitals to Brussels. One does not need to accept the old neo-functionalist argument about the transfer of *loyalty* to the supranational level to accept the empirical fact that the centre of gravity of lobbying has shifted to Brussels (Mazey and Richardson, 1993; 1996). This is not equally true for all policy sectors, but the tendency appears to be that all sectors eventually become 'Europeanized', albeit at quite different rates. Increasingly, interest groups may have Euro-level objectives (and, therefore, Euro-lobbying strategies) which are different from and incompatible with state interests. Also, of necessity, interest groups have to develop cross-national links with a diverse range of actors from different cultures and traditions if they are to be well-informed and influence European public policy. Even where the interests of the nation state and those of private interest groups coincide, the ability of states to secure a 'policy win' at the Euro-level is highly unpredictable, even in relatively straightforward policy games (Mazey and Richardson, 1997). As Héritier has demonstrated, much of the explanation for the great variety of types of regulation at the Euro-level (what she terms a 'regulatory patchwork') is that no one state *consistently* wins in the battle to get its favoured regulatory framework adopted at the Euro-level. In her terminology, the ability of any one state to secure a 'home run' is limited as other states move quickly to thwart its attempted home run (Héritier, 1996). In the Euro-policy game, uncertainty of outcomes is high and rarely does one player or group of players control the game. Thus, the phenomenon identified by Heinz *et al*. in the USA (discussed above) is *especially* evident in the EU. Risk avoidance and uncertainty reduction strategies lead to promiscuity by interest groups – and, of course, promiscuity increases risk and uncertainty still further. Even the European Commission, which has been working so hard to institutionalize the process of groups intermediation (and to create stable policy communities and networks at the Euro-level) undermines its own search for

stability by its policy of extreme openness to groups. It encourages interest aggregation via Euro-level associations, yet is habitually promiscuous itself in seeking out such a wide range of groups beyond the Euro-associations.

An additional factor is that strong states, in the EU context, such as France have become weakened players in Brussels – what Kassim calls the 'dissipation of the national' (Kassim, 1997, p. 179). Interest groups, even from the big hitters amongst the member states, have, therefore, become used to developing independent Euro-lobbying strategies in the normal day to day business of Euro policy making. National interest groups are embedded in the 'low politics' of EU policy making, in trans-national associations of many types, and are increasingly adept at trans-national *ad hoc* rainbow coalition building. Clearly, there are cross-national and cross-sectoral differences in the degree of cleavage between state and interest-group policy objectives at the European level. However, even in those states where these objectives have either tended to coincide or where states were hitherto able to maintain a dominant relationship with their domestic interest group systems, there is a growing realization by interest groups that they must develop their own independent lobbying position. For example, in her Anglo-French comparison of the relevance of domestic policy networks to European negotiations, Josselin's evidence suggested that networks:

> … in which private actors retained relative autonomy *fuelled in part by distrust and the need for information*, appeared to be better suited to the pursuit of multiple lobbying targets. Conversely, vertical, state-dominated structures would not encourage the development of active strategies of transnational linkages on the part of non-governmental organizations … British sectoral actors, who were 'less tied to a strict policy structure than the French, were better able to exploit the multi-access lobbying system of the EU'. (Josselin, 1996, p. 314, emphasis added)

Interestingly, French groups now seem to be learning the logic of organization at the European level, having seen that they cannot rely on the French state. Kassim's analysis of French autonomy and the European Union concludes that 'increasingly, French societal interests, including regional authorities, companies and trade unions are inclined to make direct contact with EU rather than relying on the state to represent their concerns' (Kassim, 1997, p. 178). Similar conclusions are reached by Micheletti regarding the effects of Europeanization on Swedish interest groups (Micheletti, 1995, p. 127).

A central feature of the lobbying strategies of member states and interest groups is that partners in the 'policy game' are unreliable. No single actor can control a game with so many different players or deliver the desired payoff. This is one of the main causes of the erosion of state control over domestic interest groups and weakens one of the key features of the glue holding national policy communities together. Promiscuity not only begets more promiscuity – it also breeds mistrust between actors. The sheer number of actors, and the enormous diversity that they bring to Brussels, makes it unlikely that the kind of policy community politics which often characterized post-war welfare states can be established, except where highly specialized and detailed technical issues are being resolved. Even in these cases, it is difficult to contain issues in this way when those not party to the process

(or those who have lost out despite participation) can so easily re-open debate elsewhere – for example in the European Parliament or before the European Court of Justice. That a new form of policy community, able to bridge these different venues – what Coleman and Perl term 'policy community mediators' (Coleman and Perl, 1999, p. 707) – might emerge seems equally unlikely in complex transnational policy systems such as the EU. No doubt policy brokers and policy entrepreneurs do emerge and play a key role in breaking log-jams between different sets of actors as Coleman and Perl suggest. However, evidence from the EU suggests that this is much more ad hoc and unpredictable for it to be shoe-horned into a definition of 'policy community', in order to extend the concept's utility. The most stable form of transnational co-operative structure, is, as they suggest, likely to be what they term 'transnational communities of experts (Coleman and Perl, 1999, p. 708) – or as Peter Haas earlier termed them, 'epistemic' communities' (Haas, 1992). However, not even the most enthusiastic supporter of the epistemic community concept would argue that this is a system of transnational governance.

The concomitant of the increasing independence of interest groups from national government is, of course, the willingness of national governments to abandon old (even corporatist) arrangements when the exigencies of international negotiations so demand. Just as interest groups become more promiscuous internationally, so do national governments. Each partner's transnational behaviour erodes not only national sovereignty (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, pp. 1–2) but also traditional trust between policy actors back home. For example, Epstein's central thesis in his study of the relationship between the French Government and French agricultural interests during the GATT negotiations, 1986–93, is that the evidence contradicts the fundamental elements of the policy community model. His study is worth quoting at length as it illustrates perfectly some of the conditions under which policy community politics breaks down and the vulnerability of the system to exogenous shocks and internal defection as the individual participants became involved in more 'nested games' (Tsebelis, 1990). Epstein suggests that the long impasse in the GATT negotiations was the basic cause of the abandonment, by the French Government, of its traditionally close ties with the French agricultural policy community. Thus:

> The impasse triggered an international political crisis and precipitated a domestic conflict within France over the value of a compromise. When it became clear that a solution on agriculture was the key to progress in other sectors more important to the country's economic welfare, extra-agricultural actors became ultimately involved in the decision-making process. The influence of the traditional policy community was undermined, as interest group leaders and high-ranking officials … found themselves playing second fiddle to those closer to the power centre of the French government, specifically to the offices of the president and prime minister, and the finance, industry and foreign ministries. The result was an unstable pattern of policy-making during the crisis period, as new exclusive groups – consisting of government actors – took decisions in new arenas. Because of the crisis at hand, developing a common French position took priority over the resource

> exchange typical in routinized group-state discussions. (Epstein, 1997, p. 357)

As he goes on to argue, this does not necessarily suggest that the whole policy community 'model' should be discarded. Instead, he concedes that ' … the prevailing assumptions about French agriculture still seem to ring true in most cases' (Epstein, 1997, p. 366). Outside the GATT, it appears that group-state co-operation continued '… in most areas where routine, depoliticized decisions are the norm' (Epstein, 1997, p. 366). The crucial point, for our own analysis, is that the French Government developed a set of preferences in relation to the GATT negotiations quite inconsistent with the preferences of the long standing French policy community for agriculture. Moreover, the French Government's process of preference formation was influenced by its continued participation in a quite different policy venue (EU/GATT negotiations). Once this happened, what Grande claims is the 'paradox of weakness' of interest groups in international negotiations became apparent (Grande, 1996).

Grande's assertion that it is interest groups who generally lose out to member states in the EU points to an unresolved puzzle in the literature on EU policy making. Different authors see the politics of uncertainty having opposite effects on the same sets of actors. Much research needs to be done to identify the many variables which can influence which types of actors win in situations of high uncertainty and the nature of their preference formation processes. However, there is at least a reasonable argument to be put that interest groups have a greater degree of flexibility and a greater readiness to re-order their preferences in response to the unfolding policy game than do member states. Preference formation is, therefore, possibly the key to understanding the changing behaviour of the different stakeholders. It is not just interest groups who have to adjust their position and tactics according to the prevailing climate of opinion – so do public bureaucracies and national governments. In the end, they are all vulnerable to 'shifts in policy fashion' as new ideas gain good currency. It is to this topic that we finally turn in our attempt to identify some further causes of policy change.

4. Ideas as 'Policy Viruses': Do Policy Communities Die or Mutate?

John Kingdon, in his study of agenda setting, quotes a Washington official who observed that the origin of public policies was difficult to determine. As he put it 'this is not like a river. There is no point of origin' (Kingdon, 1984, p. 21). If this is true (as surely it is) then identifying the origins of new policy fashions or policy frames is likely to be extremely difficult. Yet, clearly, there are major changes, periodically, in the way that public and private actors view policy problems. Moreover, as we suggested in section 2, actual policy changes too. New problems and solutions can become fashionable and cut across sectoral and national boundaries. This is not to suggest that even profound change (what Hall would term 'third order' change – see Hall, 1993) cannot come about endogenously in policy communities and networks. However, exogenous changes in policy fashion, ideas, or policy frames presents a very serious challenge to existing policy communities and networks. New ideas have a virus-like quality and have an ability to disrupt

existing policy systems, power relationships and policies. As Reich suggests, public preferences and support for policies grows and changes 'as people have come to understand and engage with the ideas underlying them' (Reich, 1988, p. 4). Such exogenous shifts in preferences, influenced by new ideas and knowledge, are rather like viruses present in the atmosphere we breathe. Policy systems, particularly when they are engaged transnationally, contain a plethora of ideas at any given time. Thus, as Kingdon suggests:

> many ideas are possible in principle and float around in a 'policy soup' in which specialist try out their ideas in a variety of ways … proposals are floated, come into contact with one another, are revised and combined with one another, and floated again … the proposals that survive to the status of serious consideration meet several criteria, including their technical feasibility, their fit with dominant values and the current national mood, their budgetary workability, and the political support or opposition they might experience. Thus the selection system narrows the set of conceivable proposals and selects from that large set a short list of proposals that is actually available for serious consideration. (Kingdon, 1984, p. 21)

Extending our 'virus' analogy, national policy stakeholders are increasingly internationalized – they, literally, travel a lot and meet all sorts of other policy stakeholders from foreign systems. They bring new ideas and policy frames back home. Thus, like natural viruses, policy viruses spread too. For well-established policy communities who have long-held the 'franchise' for a policy area, new ideas are a *potential* threat, unless they emanate from the community itself or can be adapted to suit the existing needs of the community. A key issue for the entrenched interests is the degree to which the new ideas and knowledge can be accommodated in existing and agreed 'policy frames' (Schön and Rein, 1994) or whether completely new frames emerge, backed by new 'adversarial coalitions' (Dudley and Richardson, 1998).

Examples of the effect of policy viruses abound in the post-war period. Thus, why is it that so many cities throughout the world adopted similar high-rise, high-density, housing policies to deal with the problem of an outdated housing stock, only to find that this policy 'virus' caused untold damage to urban communities and created more policy problems than it solved? Similar effects can be seen in the field of transport policy, with the universal adoption of massive road construction schemes to deal with the problems of increased car ownership and growth of the trucking industry, again only to find that this fashionable solution appeared to create more problems than it solved. Both the housing and transport cases seem to illustrate Reich's observation of ' … how much the critical definition of problems and choices influences the subsequent design and execution of public policies' (Reich, 1988, p. 5). Thus, as Moore argues, in institutional settings ' … ideas seem to guide public action in the same way that Kuhn's "paradigms" guide "normal" scientific inquiry' (Moore, 1988, p. 72). To Moore, ideas establish:

> … the context within which public policy is debated and executed. That is, the ideas simultaneously establish the assumptions, justifications, purposes, and means of public action. In doing so, they simultaneously

> authorize and instruct different sections of the society to take actions on behalf of public purposes. (Moore, 1988, p. 75)

He goes on:

> ideas matter because they establish the contexts within which policy debates are conducted, organizational activities are rendered coherent and meaningful, and people's actions are animated and directed … *although related to existing political forces and institutions, they seem to follow a logic of their own, which sometimes unbalances or rebalances existing forces*. (Moore, 1988, p. 78, emphasis added)

Moore's reference to the *unbalancing* of existing forces is especially apposite to our consideration of the relationship between policy communities and policy change – hence our resort to the 'virus' analogy. Ideas, institutions and interests become entwined. As Jacobsen correctly observed, the pervasive flaw in 'power of ideas' arguments is the fact that ideas and interests cannot be separated (Jacobsen, 1995, p. 309). Similarly, Moore also notes that it is both possible that '… particular ideas are nothing more than a smokescreen for the institutional and personal interests that are really animating and guiding action …'. He concedes that it is difficult, empirically, to disprove this (Moore, 1988, p. 71). However, it does seem reasonable to argue, for example in the British case post-1979, that new ideas, such as de-regulation, privatization, contracting-out, marketization, did indeed spread virus-like across policy sectors. 'unbalancing' existing forces (policy communities) as they did so. Existing policy communities faced three basic choices in the face of this exogenous change. First, they could accept their own demise in the face of the new 'virus'. Secondly, they could adapt or 'mutate'[3] the virus itself. Thirdly, they could themselves mutate in order to survive. In Mrs Thatcher's Britain, the latter generally proved to be the easiest option. Thus, actors learned to adapt to de-regulation, privatization, internal markets, and even externally imposed research and teaching quality exercises in universities. A key aspect of this adaptiveness was the acceptance of completely new rules of the game and the admittance of new stakeholders. The notion of an adaptive stakeholder is described as part of an *evolutionary* process by John. He argues that the evolutionary process in public policy '… is different to the classic Darwinian selection mechanism in that human actors are capable of consciously adapting to their environment' (John, 1998, p. 185; 1999, pp. 43–5). In contrast to the thrust of the argument here, John appears to see the evolutionary process in public policy as largely *intramural* activity – 'thus it is better to see the emergence of policy as an evolution of ideas and interests within generally preset institutions, patterns of group politics and socio-economic constraints' (John, 1998, p. 186). Our resort to the virus analogy is meant to convey the importance of *exogenously* generated ideas as a shock to both existing institutional arrangements and the actors that benefit from them.

Ideas are anchored in institutions and interests, at some point, as Jacobsen implies. Ideas are also anchored, more or less, to knowledge of some kind. Indeed, it might be argued that knowledge often precedes ideas in the policy process. Whether knowledge precedes or follows ideas, there is no doubt that knowledge is a powerful 'change agent' (either endogenous or exogenous) for policy communities and networks. As Radaelli points out, various writers have suggested that

'knowledge is an independent and highly significant variable in the investigation of the policy process' (Radaelli, 1995, p. 161). Space precludes a review of the large body of literature concerned with knowledge in the policy process, but it is sufficient for our purposes to posit knowledge as a major 'perturbation' (Sabatier, 1998, p. 118) which can lead to change. Again, there are some obvious empirical examples, such as knowledge about the effects of smoking on health, the effects of diet on heart disease, the effects of motor vehicle exhaust fumes on health, the depletion of the ozone layer, all of which lead to major changes in public policy and to the power and composition of existing policy communities and networks. Similar examples can be found in the field of drug addiction, education, crime prevention, water treatment etc. Thus, change is often knowledge driven, albeit via a very political process such as competing advocacy coalitions, each of whom claims ownership of the truth. For example, in the USA, Laird argues, 'the system of policy making encourages partisans to buttress their cases by claiming that they are grounded in valid scientific and technological knowledge …' (Laird, 1999, p. 4).

Knowledge can take many forms. In the field of public policy making, knowledge about experience elsewhere is important. Within nation states, federal systems are especially likely to generate cross-system learning opportunities. The process of policy learning is extremely complex (Laird, 1999) but policy transfer between countries seems to be an increasingly important component of this process (Wolman, 1992, p. 27). This is perfectly understandable. As Rose points out, problems that are unique to one country are rather unusual (Rose, 1991, p. 3; see also Rose, 1993). However, the policy transfer process is not apolitical. As Robertson suggests, policy lessons from abroad are often put forward as politically neutral truths, whereas 'beneath this superficial impartiality, political adversaries just as often are using such lessons as political weapons' (Robertson, 1991, p. 55). Similarly Dolowitz and Marsh are suspicious of the pluralistic overtones of much of the literature on policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, p. 355). Both elites and activists have multiple motives for using foreign policy evidence (Bennett, 1991, p. 31). Research on policy transfer is now burgeoning and space precludes an extensive review of findings from existing research (for an excellent review of the literature see Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). However, for our purposes, it is important to note that the citation of foreign experience – especially the notion that things *can* be done differently – can be potentially powerful challenge to entrenched domestic policy communities. Like new scientific knowledge, or new ideas, policy transfer can be a powerful and disturbing exogenous shock.

5. Conclusion: Uncertain Agendas, Shifting Networks and Complex Coalitions

The central thrust of our argument is that the 'real' world of policy making in Western Europe has changed in the past two decades. Existing policy styles have changed in response to the pressures of exogenous events, particularly the declining competitiveness of Western Europe in the face of perceived (and possibly exaggerated) globalization. Governments have been more assertive in attacking some of the old distributional coalitions (effectively, policy communities) which

were resisting policy change. These coalitions had, as Peters suggests, been examples of Scharpf's 'decision trap' (Scharpf, 1988) typically producing sub-optimal decisions. We have argued that states have tried to address the decision-trap problem and this has put policy communities under pressure. This has thrown into question analyses of the policy process based almost exclusively on communities and networks. It also raises questions about the ability of these concepts to explain major policy change, other than that, at some point in the policy process, the process of governance involves using networks of some kind (as surely it always did?). Thus, governments themselves have been key players in destabilizing long-standing policy communities once they perceived these institutional arrangements to be too costly. The paradox of this destabilization by governments is that it may have reinforced other trends that have in turn weakened the control which governments have over private actors and events.

Thus, a second cause of destabilization is possibly an inevitable artefact of the policy community system itself. So successful was it in the 1960s and 1970s that it caused its own partial demise as a process for controlling agendas and the pace and content of policy change. Other interests wanted a slice of the rather lucrative franchises for public policy and acted rationally to gain it. In so far as they did, policy making became less 'clubbable,' to borrow Heclo's term. These new entrants often brought different values, policy frames, demands and modes of behaviour to the negotiating table. The character of the policy game changed.

Thirdly, and more importantly, interests realized that there are other venues, arenas, or sites which could be used to launch new policy ideas and frames within national policy systems and beyond. This appears to be happening at the national level but is especially the case within the European Union, where the range of opportunity structures is considerable. The process of Europeanization (whatever its causes) has changed the policy game fundamentally, especially with the further extension of majority voting, increased powers for the European Parliament and an activist European Court. Uncertainty abounds in the Euro-policy process which often bears a closer resemblance to a 'garbage can' model (Cohen *et al.,* 1972) than to a system of organized policy communities or stable networks. The characteristics of EU policy making, therefore, do not seem conducive to the systematic emergence of traditional policy community politics or to stable policy networks as a system of governance at the EU level. Moreover, the characteristics of EU policy making help to undermine stabilized patterns at the national level. The system of EU governance is perhaps best described as uncertain agendas, shifting networks and complex coalitions.

Finally, we have stressed the importance of ideas and knowledge as factors which can often upset the cosy life of established policy communities and networks. Whilst not necessarily always a threat, ideas and knowledge can have a virus-like quality and present a very real challenge to those stakeholders who have relied on the security of cocoon-like policy communities. Ideas, like viruses, tend to be destabilizing agents and demand much skill on the part of existing players, if these players are to retain their existing benefits. In practice the new ideas and their attendant policy frames often 'capture' all stakeholders who then find themselves adjusting to a new set of rules and power distributions quite different from the old

policy regimes. None of this is to suggest that it is time to discard policy community and network approaches in the analysis of policy making in western Europe. The thrust of the argument here is that actor behaviour changes over time, as does policy, and that it can be difficult to explain this process in terms of communities and networks. These traditional institutions seem more relevant in describing how change is implemented – what Epstein (cited above) termed routinized, depoliticized decisions. For explanations of how the big picture changes, we must, alas, look elsewhere.

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About the Author

Jeremy Richardson, Nuffield College, Oxford OX1 1NF, UK; e-mail: *jeremy.richardson@nuf.ox.ac.uk*

Notes

1 It was also a genuinely independent British approach. As its co-author, Grant Jordan, later observed 'there was no straight-line application of US ideas (about sub-government and iron triangles) to a British context. Instead, there was a description of British policy making structures – with a later recognition of US precedents' (Jordan, 1990, p. 325).

2 I am grateful to Keith Dowding for this suggestion.

3 I am grateful to Sonia Mazey for suggesting the 'mutation' refinement. Peter John also refers to mutations, in a similar fashion, as 'chance reformulations of the policy idea' (John, 1998, pp. 44–5).

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