A COMMENT ON MARSH AND McCONNELL: TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR ESTABLISHING POLICY SUCCESS

MARK BOVENS

ESTABLISHING POLICY SUCCESSES: THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LOCUS AND FOCUS

The paper by Marsh and McConnell published in this volume is an important and innovative contribution to the debate about policy evaluation. Besides a careful discussion of the literature on assessing policy successes, a major value of the paper is its addition of the process dimension to the framework that has been developed by Paul ‘t Hart, Guy Peters and myself. I would like to suggest that the paper could take this heuristic innovation even further by distinguishing more clearly between ‘process’ assessment and ‘outcome’ assessment.

Process, programmatic and political, the three ‘p’s’ in the paper and in figure 1, are analytically not on the same level, in spite of the attractive alliteration. The authors treat them as three equivalent dimensions of policy success. However, the programmatic and political assessments, as introduced by Bovens et al. (2001), were both ways of looking at the outcomes of a policy, whereas the process assessment, as introduced by Marsh and McConnell, is, indeed, assessing the processes that lead to the adoption of the policy. What is more important, both the policy process and the policy outcomes can be assessed in programmatic and political terms, respectively.

It may be helpful therefore to distinguish between the ‘locus’, the object, and the ‘focus’, the perspective, of policy evaluation instead of using the unilateral concept of ‘dimension’. Marsh and McConnell have made a significant innovation by adding another locus, another important element to be studied when assessing the success or failure of a particular policy. However, I would argue that, just as in assessing the outcomes of an implemented policy, this object, the process that led to the adoption of the policy, can be assessed both from a programmatic and from a political perspective.

In our earlier work we distinguished between programmatic and political failures and successes in order to have a more sophisticated and politically sensitive framework for policy evaluation. The programmatic perspective on success and failure is rooted in the traditional rational-synoptic analysis of policy-making. It assesses policies in terms of policy objectives and goal achievement. The political perspective is rooted in a power-based analysis of policy-making and it assesses success and failure in terms of political casualties and spoils.

I would argue that, likewise, the process that led to the adoption of a policy can also be analysed both from a programmatic and from a political perspective. In fact, the authors are doing just that when they discuss the process dimension. A policy process can be seen as a ‘programmatic’ success when the legislative process ‘leaves the main direction and detailed instruments of the policy intact’ (p. 16), and when the policy bill is adapted by

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parliament within the planned timeframe. This is a perfectly rational way of assessing the policy process: did the policy-makers manage to get the policy adopted in accordance with their goals; that is, within the planned timeframe and with the main instruments and direction intact?

Besides this, one could also assess the process in more political terms. To what extent did it enlarge, or diminish, the political capital of the government? Was the process successful in rallying support for the policy? Did it help to convey an image of strength and determination either for the cabinet or for individual ministers? Did it help to influence the outcome of any elections? The authors make such a political process analysis, albeit implicitly, when they discuss the process of the enactment of Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s Industrial Relations Act. It was a great programmatic success (rushed through parliament in less than six weeks), but eventually the process resulted in a political failure, because it contributed to Howard’s subsequent loss of office in the 2007 elections.

This amendment lends itself not to a tripartite analytical framework, but a two-by-two framework because both the policy process and the policy outcome can be assessed in programmatic and political terms. The British Dangerous Dogs Act can serve as an example. The process of drafting the policy was highly successful in programmatic terms since the bill was passed through the House of Commons in one sitting. The process was also successful in political terms because the swift action of the government restored some of the political credibility of the then Home Secretary, Kenneth Baker. The policy itself, on the other hand, was hardly a programmatic success since it was patchily enforced and had to be amended. In political terms, the Dangerous Dogs policy was a downright failure since it attracted severe criticism from a variety of public actors. A crude assessment of the British Dangerous Dogs policy, which distinguishes between locus and focus, is depicted in table 1, above.

I would therefore suggest that we reframe table 1 and distinguish between two major categories – process and outcomes (so much for the alliteration) – each assessed from two perspectives: programmatic and political. This can easily be done. With regard to the process dimension in the original table: passage of legislation would be programmatic; the other three would be political – in the final analysis, legitimacy, sustainability and influence are all political categories. In this vein, analytical sophistication and political sensitivity can be combined and the framework will be of even greater help in differentiating between various sorts of policy success and failure.

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TABLE 1 A programmatic and political assessment of the UK Dangerous Dogs Act