Public Policy as Inaction: The Politics of Doing Nothing

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‘Why doesn’t the government do something about this?’ is an oft-voiced complaint in legislatures, TV debates, opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and cyberspace. It encompasses issues ranging from civil war atrocities in foreign lands, to domestic poverty in the face of severe austerity measures. Indeed, often such outpourings are retrospective: ‘why didn’t the government do something about this?’, whether it be recognising that a terrorist cell had been operating freely without detection until the moment of an urban bombing, or acting on key financial reports expressing concern that ‘boom’ was about to become ‘bust’. In principle, we should be able to turn to the policy sciences to help understand the nature of such ‘doing nothing’, but this is a difficult task without an analytical anchor. Despite, as Dye (2012: 12) argues that all definitions of public policy boil down to the same thing: ‘whatever governments choose to do or not do’, there is a bias in the policy sciences towards the study of policy activity, to the virtual neglect of policy inactivity.

This gap is a significant one because, in liberal democracies especially, there are strong expectations that governments, when faced with imperfect, problematic and undesirable social conditions, will intervene by default to ameliorate these undesirable conditions, even if government policy amounts to one of creating or protecting markets to do the actual work (a free economy-strong state approach). The normative discourses that typically accompany such interventions, perceive ‘doing nothing’ as negligent, irresponsible or inept. Economists even produce COI (Cost of Inaction) indices to prove the point (Anand et al, 2012). Public policy analysis needs to develop a more robust understanding and more sophisticated evaluation of inaction. This paper provides a roadmap for doing so. First it examines the relative neglect of policy inaction within the policy sciences. Second, it addresses the issue of what constitutes policy inaction, addressing some of the methodological difficulties in doing so. Third, it examines the issue of how policy inaction is manifest. Fourth, it explores the causes of inaction, focusing on both deliberate inaction and inaction constrained by a number of psychological, institutional and political-ideational contexts. Fifth, it sets out some of the complexities and tension of policy inaction, including the tension between inaction as (sometimes) ‘good policy’ but ‘bad politics’. Finally, it identifies issues for future research.

Policy Sciences and the Study of Inaction: The Dog that Coughed Rather Than Barked

The policy sciences that emerged after the Second-World War were focused on societal betterment, none more so than in the work of Lasswell (1956, 1971) and his seminal work identifying the seven stages through which societies should harness knowledge to produce and continually reflect on public policies (see Simmons et al. 1974; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984; Althaus et al. 2012). In essence, the focus was and remains for many policy scholars the design, implementation and evaluation of policies, as authoritative courses of action that need to be carefully calibrated before being put into practice and then appraised with a view to further intervention as appropriate (DeLeon, 1988). Accordingly, the study of public policy over the past half century has seen thousands of studies describing, explaining and evaluating policy ambitions and interventions across
a multitude of policy areas. In the US in particular, there has been strong support in the policy sciences for the view that ‘inaction’ is often legitimate because it is best to leave problem resolution to self-correcting markets, unless there are strong equity reasons to do otherwise.

This intellectual agenda remains persuasive to many, some critical voices notwithstanding (Fischer, 2003; Colebatch 2006). Key contemporary understandings of policy processes are also tilted towards an understanding of action and intervention. For example, multiple streams, punctuated equilibrium and advocacy coalition theorists address issues such as the circumstances in which the dominance of existing programs and policy paradigms gets challenged and ‘windows of opportunity’ for policy change or innovation present themselves (Sabatier and Jenkins Smith, 1993; Baumgartner and Jones, 2009). Likewise, institutional analysis has focused on explaining both policy stability and change, notably through uncovering social mechanisms such as path dependence and social learning (Pierson, 2000; Hall, 1993; Kay, 2006). And studies of policy instruments quite naturally are premised on the idea of governments ‘doing stuff’ and do not account for abstinence, delaying, waiting and other ‘tools’ of calculated inaction (Salamon, 2002; Hood and Margetts, 2007).

There are some helpful exceptions to the aforementioned trend, moving away from an emphasis on active and observable intervention. In the 1960s and 1970s, US political science’s steps beyond pluralism in a quest for a theory of power in society took some scholars into the realm of wondering what power was at work in preventing certain dissatisfaction, grievances and desires among sections of the public from being ‘converted’ into public policy. Lukes (1974, 2005) and the work of Bacharach and Baratz (1970) which tackles the frustrations of anti-poverty efforts in Baltimore, caught the mood of the era by identifying the phenomenon of ‘non decisions’ to encapsulate systemic biases such as rules, procedures and values, which filter out grievances from mainstream political debate as well as governmental policy agendas. Cobb and Elder’s (1971) agenda-building model likewise emphasised the importance of ‘gatekeeping’, where certain actors were able to determine what issues or proposals will not reach the political/governmental agenda. Many years later, Cobb et al. (1997) followed on with the concept of ‘agenda denial’, where elites use cultural strategies to avoid, marginalise and redefine issues. Much of this type of analysis drew on Edelman (1964, 1977) whose who argued that positive, ‘feel-good’ political language is used as a palliative to mask inequalities and cultivate regime legitimacy.

Working against the mainstream of pragmatic, technocratic, problem-solving oriented policy analysis, these works expanded the dependent variable of policy analysis by drawing our attention to silence (in policy discourses) and inaction in terms of priorities, budgets, and programs as phenomena requiring as much interpretation and assessment as debate and intervention. Yet overall, most public policy scholars have tended to display the same ‘bias for action’ that characterizes public expectations of government: that public policy intervenes to address societal problems or at least provides and polices regulatory frameworks enabling markets, non-governmental actors or others to do so
What is Policy Inaction?

Inaction is exceptionally difficult to define. To use a metaphor, there is a universe of ‘doing nothings’ (action not taken) on an incalculable number of issues by governments throughout the world. The state government of Alaska, for example, ‘did nothing’ about the numerous post-2009 series of austerity measures in Greece. This is not to suggest it should have, but to raise the issue that we need to find a way of narrowing down and studying inaction in a way that is meaningful to particular policy contexts. Another difficulty is that doing nothing can involve doing something in the sense that inactivity can be purposeful. For example, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s explicitly refused to provide a debt guarantee for the iconic, financially troubled airline Qantas, on the grounds that ‘...it is best placed to compete and to flourish if it is unshackled and un-propped up by government’ (Abbott 2014). Complicating matters further (and reflecting classic methodological divides in political science) policy inaction might be considered an objective phenomenon that we can observe and study empirically (through interviews, studying policy papers and so on) or it be considered a much fuzzier phenomenon which hinges on differing perceptions. For example, in the face of a humanitarian crisis overseas, media and political opponents may accuse government of ‘doing nothing’ to help resolve the crisis, yet government may say it is ‘doing everything’ it realistically can.

At first, glance, such methodological issues might seem insuperable. Yet we would argue that the key to moving forward is to think of inaction as being first and foremost a political activity. It arises out of and generates conflict. It is one of many competing responses to policy problems as well as producing conflict over what government should or shouldn’t have done. We define policy inaction as government’s incapacity and/or unwillingness – whether explicit and observable or perceived - to actively intervene in addressing a particular policy problem within its jurisdiction. There are several advantages to this definition which help overcome, at least for heuristic purposes, the methodological challenges of policy inaction.

First, it prompts us to focus on inaction that is meaningful in a particular policy context because it emphasises a problem within the particular remit of policy makers, as well as potential ‘agency’ influences (unwillingness) and ‘structural’ ones (incapacity). Yet given the political nature of inaction, we consider
‘jurisdiction’ not simply in the technical sense of formal roles and responsibilities, but also in terms political issues in that domain. If for example government doesn’t have the power to prevent a citizen being extradited for trial overseas, significant media calls for it to intervene, means that ‘doing nothing’ becomes part of meaningful political debate in that jurisdiction. We should also recognise that ‘meaningful’ in a particular context is not confined to inaction being simply one a range of options high on decision making agendas. Inaction, may effectively be foisted on policy makers because they lack the capacity (e.g. financial resources, backing of a sustainable political coalition) to act.

Second, it builds into the definition, the fact that inaction often requires active effort. Inaction is the subject of many applied books on policy skills, where ‘doing nothing’, the status quo, is typically included in policy briefs (see e.g. Bardach, 2011; Mintrom, 2011). Inaction is also the subject game theoretic analysis (McCain, 2009) and cost benefit analysis (Weimer, 2008) where the focus is on studying decision making behaviour in the context of the potential benefits, risks of different forms of action/inaction. For example, a recent static cost-benefit analysis of two policies in New South Wales (Australia) in relation to cannabis over a one year time period, compared the highly regulated status quo with a legalised model (Shanahan and Ritter, 2004). Interestingly, it found the net social benefit of both to be very similar.

Third, it helps us navigate the deep-rooted methodological divide within political science. Inaction is ‘real’, objective and observable, as well as constructed and a matter of interpretation. Let us explain each of these in turn. Reflecting the positivist strand of the social sciences, inaction can be an indisputable fact, in that there is a clear, articulated policy choice not to act on an issue. In 2014, for example, the Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi refused to intervene in the case of three English language Al-Jazeera journalists who had been sentenced to between seven and ten years in prison. Yet there is also constructed element as well, in that there may be differing perception on whether such ‘holding back’ does equally constitute inaction. Often such perceptions are connected to a normative position i.e. whether or not the ‘inaction’ is supported. In the previous example, supporters of the stance of the Egyptian President saw the ‘inaction’ as a positive move, upholding the independence of the judiciary. While we cannot dissect the objective/constructed elements of inaction in some form of policy autopsy because the blurred and contested boundaries between them epitomise classic methodological divides in the social sciences, for heuristic purposes we can at least recognise these grey areas and ultimately use them to help understand the politicised nature of policy inaction, rather than assuming that it is purely a concrete phenomenon that we need to isolate and put under the microscope.

Fourth, our definition is quite compatible with policy being disaggregated into different elements, with inaction in some respects but not others. In the face of the problem of high unemployment, for example, government could be ‘active’ in areas such as reforming welfare benefits and creating training opportunities, but ‘inactive’ on the job creation front because that matter is left to the market.
How is Policy Inaction Manifested?

Ironically, some forms of inaction are manifest in clear and transparent ways because ‘doing nothing’ means ‘doing something’. Government may state explicitly that inaction is the most appropriate way to address an issue – at least in the short term. This might, for example, ruling out participation in international troop deployment and refusing to sign international treaties. In 2012, for example, a number of countries including the US, Germany, Canada, Japan and New Zealand refused to sign regulations of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) which would have resulted in UN governance of the internet and other forms of global telecommunication. Such demonstrations of inaction may be reinforced by citizen, lobby group and media pressure for intervention, only for government to reiterate its laissez faire stance. In such instances of inaction, we can observe ‘inaction’ at work through commitments found in speeches, press releases, TV/radio interviews, legislative debates, inquiry hearings and more. In such circumstances, government manifestly and wilfully ‘does nothing’, whether we find out at the time, or retrospectively through hindsight examination.

Incapacity to act is not always as clearly evident as intentional inaction. It can be, if government states that it would like to act but can’t. In 2013 for example, UK Prime Minister David Cameron was prevented from supporting military action against the use of chemical weapons in Syria because he was defeated in a vote in the House of Commons. But if government ministers or officials do not state publically that they are unable to act, politically meaningful inaction is manifest in discourse from opposition media and others, that government is failing to act.

Causes of Inaction

Ascertaining the causes of inaction confronts further methodological differences at the heart of political science. Are the causes of inaction to be studied as an exact science where variables can be isolated and observed, using numerous statistical tools and techniques to determine, with a high degree of statistical significance that X caused Y (inaction)? Or must we rely on instinct, judgement and argument to ascertain the causes of inaction? The very fact that such diverse approaches co-exist, tells us that the ascertaining the causes of inaction is fraught with difficulties. For example, governments’ ‘failure to act’ and prevent the global financial has been attributed to many factors, such as greed overtaking public interest, banks offering high bonuses, regulators taking their eye off the ball, incompetent politicians and the propensity of capitalism to go through cycle of crisis. For us, this example illustrates several key issues when thinking about the causes of policy inaction. We suggest that there is never a single causal factor. Rather, there exist multiple potential causal factors, interacting in complex ways with varying and often disputed degrees of influence. For heuristic purposes we can usefully circumvent these complexities by conceiving of three layers of explanation – while recognising that different methods and arguments would focus upon and/or give privilege to some causal factors over others. Here we identify individual, institutional and societal centred explanations for inaction. They are not mutually exclusive but there is benefit in separating them for purposes of analysis.
Individual-focused explanations

The focus here is on the role of the decision maker. Inaction may be the product of deliberate intent or some form of pathological decision making. Several forms types can be identified

1. Tactical Inaction to Achieve Policy Goals: Goal achievement has been a mainstay of policy sciences, from comprehensive rationality and notions of the boundedly rational decision maker, to coaching skills for policy analysts. There are many understandable programme and political reasons why inaction may be short-term and pragmatic.

It may involve waiting until more evidence of the problem emerges. This was certainly the signal sent out by the Clinton Administration with regard to atrocities in Rwanda, refusing initially to intervene, or even refer to ‘genocide’ (Burkhalter, 1994). No government or policy maker can ever win all the policy debates they are involved in at any given point in time. Hence clever political actors engage in tactical delay, slicing policy conundrums into manageable bits and sequencing their attempts to get things done with respect to each. Or it may involve or waiting in the hope that the problem will dissipate or disappear. Arguably this was the case with the Australian government’s initial refusal to act to allegations of the corruption in the Australian Wheat Board Ltd., assuming that there was no case to answer (Overington, 2007). Strategic inaction can prevent inflaming an already highly contentious issue, creating space for reflection and possible even smoothing the pathway for the issue to dampen down and even disappear from the agenda. Inaction may also come about in order to pass the problem to the next administration.

Tactical inaction is always intended as a means to achieving a longer term goal. Following recent work on policy success (McConnell, 2010a, 2010b), longer term goals fall into the category of programme and/or political ones. Therefore, deliberate inaction may be the central tenet of a programme response to a particular policy problem. For example, a government may refuse to be involved in a major industrial dispute, leaving resolution to employers and trade unions. However, deliberation inaction can be the intended means of cultivating political success, such as producing electoral/career advantage, attempting to marginalise an item on the political agenda or sending out broader long term signals to reinforce the broader values and trajectories of government. In the example of major industrial dispute, for example, one can imagine the political value to government and its agenda (at least in terms of its strategic intent) of creating distance from a potentially messy and high profile dispute.

2. Risk aversion: Related to the above, as prospect theory suggests, in the face of potential gains, individuals are risk averse (Vis, 2011). For example, recent work on the ‘warning signs’ of the global financial crisis indicate, in effect, that there were none, because of a mindset and prevailing ideology that had ‘delivered’ one economic growth, healthy profits, low inflation, while at the same time portraying emerging risks as both symptomatic of the natural operation of markets, and remediable through market correction (Hindmoor and McConnell 2013). Risk calculations, at times instinctive, are also a feature of policy making (Althaus, 2008).
3. **Inability to confront issues**: Psychologists Janis and Mann (1977) use concepts such as unconflicted inertia (ignore/complacency) and defensive avoidance (shifting responsibility elsewhere) to explain inaction as maladaptive behaviour in the face of stress when policymakers confront the realities of the issues facing them. Heifetz (1994) argues that humans and thus human groups have an inordinate capacity for avoiding facing up to unpleasant realities. He calls this ‘work avoidance’: avoiding the work of social learning, of bridging the gap between the values people hold and the problems they face. This goes beyond the cognitive realm of ‘not seeing’; it is about actively dodging known unpleasant realities that defy easy solutions. Likewise, Kegan and Lahey (2009) show that individuals can display what they call an ‘immunity to change’. They are not taking action which they readily acknowledge they need to make, because they are paralysed by deep, yet hidden competing commitments.

4. **Cognitive blind spots**: Some social problems or risks get ignored because routine cognitive processing of issues produce propensities for important issues not to be recognised. Unlike the policy sciences, this phenomenon is well-recognised in individual-centric explanations in fields such as cognitive psychology, neuro-science and behavioural economics. For example, as a matter of routine, the processing of complex information and often conflicting signals requires intuitive ‘short cuts’. Yet for all the benefits of speedy and effective appraisals, there are propensities for biases to not see problems because they are considered unrepresentative of a class of stereotypical problems; they haven’t happened frequently enough to be familiar, and starting belief and assumptions about the phenomenon work against any substantial reappraisal of that phenomenon as a problem (Tversky and Khaneman, 1982).

**Institutional-focused explanations**

Here the focus is on the forums within which decision makers operate, whether they be local councils, government departments or national executives. Several phenomena can be identified which create a propensity for institutional inaction. Institutionalist theory and organisational theory help offer some explanations the circumstances that create a propensity for inaction, at least on some issues. There are some commonalties here with the cognitive aspects of individual inaction, although the focus here is on institutions – in terms of both intent not to act and institutional pathologies.

1. **Inaction as means of furthering organisational priorities**. All public institutions have key strategic goals, whether it is to provide education, protect borders or promote public health. At times, ‘doing nothing’ may be considered the most appropriate way of furthering these goals, because doing so can ‘buy time’, produce better evidence (if at all) of the problem and dampen down issues that might otherwise escalate.

2. **Inaction as the tolerance of institutional risks**. Institutions cannot prevent or solve every problem within their jurisdiction. The reasons are many, from lack of financial resources to potential conflict between goals. Risk management is a fact of institutional life, which in turns means that some risks are ‘tolerable’ (not necessarily desirable) in the sense that the furtherance of some goals comes with
the risk that some 'lower level' problems are possible, but that little or nothing should be done to address them (in effect because of the 'costs' of doing so).

3. Inaction as the product of institutional blind spots. An institution may be so focused on particular priorities that it simply does not see, and/or have the capacity to see, warnings that might otherwise have been acted upon. A study by Zegart (2007) if the CIA prior to the 9/11 attacks, found on organisation blinded to perceiving and acting on threats from Al Qaeda because it was still stuck in a Cold War mindset.

4. Inaction as institutional paralysis. Cognitive institutionalist theory has demonstrated how surprising circumstances, e.g. industrial accidents and natural disasters can produce paralytic breakdowns of meaning-making among policymakers and operators alike (Turner, 1978; Weick, 2009). Paradigmatic cases of government inaction in the face of major disaster, such as the hurricane Katrina policy fiasco in the US, have produced a spate of studies trying to account for the seemingly inexplicable inaction that occurred there prior to and following the breaking of the levees (‘t Hart, Tindall and Brown, 2009; Levitt and Whitaker, 2011).

Political-ideational explanations

Relevant factors here are a host or broader political contexts which may precipitate inaction. These include prevailing ideologies, dominant coalitions/groups, and existing policy trajectories

1. Faith in market mechanisms rather than the actions of government. Adam Smith in his treatise on the virtues for the ‘invisible hand’ of the market, was the intellectual founder of a generation of scholars (from Hayek to Friedman) think tanks (from the Institute of Economic Affairs to the Heritage Foundation) proclaiming the virtues of self-stabilising markets, and the dysfunctions of government intervention, in distorting market choices, reducing liberties and wasting valuable resources. Governance via markets, hierarchies and networks has become the default way of conceptualising contemporary state governance (Bell and Hindmoor, 2009) although most scholars recognise that these are not mutually exclusive and that aspect of markets (especially in sectors such finance and trade but also in many others such as energy and telecommunications) are part of the fabric of liberal democracies. To varying degrees, therefore, all liberal democracies have elements of faith in the market and a laissez faire (inactive) approach.

2. Coalitions ‘blocking’ action. In a world of dispersed power and loosely structured policy networks, policy actors may ‘dig in’ along partisan lines. When such centrifugal forces gain traction it can prove impossible to craft the coalitions necessary to ‘do stuff’. Powerful societal interest groups may flex their muscles to stop polices they don’t like from being adopted – even in the face of commitments to joined up government or whole-of-government approaches. Bureaucratic politics between departments and agencies within the executive branch can paralyze both the development and implementation of public policy. Separation of powers, federal systems, multiparty coalition governments and
international organisations all contain institutionalised opportunities for veto-playing (Cameron, 2000).

3. Lack of viable policy alternatives. To use Kingdon’s (2011) ‘stream’ metaphor, a problem exists and there is political support to do something about it, but there is no viable alternative out there in the ‘solutions’ stream, and hence there is no political momentum to move forward in policy terms. In 1981, for example, the Thatcher government in the UK embarked on a mission to find and an alternative to what it perceived as an unfair and unaccountable system of local property taxation (including examination of a poll tax) but it effectively gave up when it confronted the age old problem of every alternative being fraught with difficulty (McConnell, 1995).

Emerging Themes

For analysts seeking to comprehend the under-examined phenomenon of policy inaction, three themes seem to stand out. They are no means exhaustive or mutually exclusive but at the very least they can be flagged for the purposes of provoking thought and identifying issues for further research.

Perceived as Strength vs. Perceived as Weakness

In nation states with plural polities and systems of electoral accountability where unpopular elected politicians/officials run the risk of being voted out of office, there are strong expectations that policy makers will ‘do something’ to tackle pressing problems. This is particularly so when it involves crisis-type issues, where civil societies look to governments and public authorities to lead crisis responses because they have access to the resources (policy, financial, informational, legal, material) to do so. Such are the expectations of intervention that inaction is considered a sign of weakness. Steinberg (1999:132) for example, comments on the inability of the US to intervene in every post-Cold War humanitarian crisis, while recognising that it is faces the ‘heartlessness of doing nothing in the face of human suffering and the callousness of making promises we cannot keep’.

Yet such norms are by no means universal. As we move away from crisis episodes towards what can be termed the ‘normal’ rhythms of policy making (reasonable time to gather evidence, consult and examine policy options), deliberate restraint on the part of government can be framed as a virtue i.e. of not engaging in knee-jerk reactions, of not giving into vested interests, of not interfering in self-correcting markets and so on. In the wake of the global financial crisis and with a rise of unemployment in the US and debates about measures such as retraining and extending unemployment benefits, a Rasmussen survey in October 2011 found that 32% of those interviewed favoured doing nothing at all. ‘Doing nothing’ can bring praise or blame, although for policy makers a key task is to judge the circumstances which are most liable to produce the former.
'Good policy’ vs. ‘Bad Politics’

Policy makers may aspire to different forms of ‘successes’ (McConnell, 2010b, 2010b, 2011,) but often there are trade-offs between them. Cultivating one form (such as programme success) can jeopardise another (such as political success). Put colloquially, public policies may be ‘good politics’ but ‘bad policy’. Therefore, there may be a tension between inaction which policy makers consider to be a perfectly sensible response to a particular policy problem, and the political damage that may occur from doing nothing. Austerity measures introduced in countries such as Spain, Greece, Ireland and the UK on the wake of the global financial crises, have provoked outcries at the pain and suffering caused to vulnerable groups. Governments refusing to ameliorate these ‘harm’ through financial support packages may be ‘good policy’ (in the sense that inaction aids the goal of implanting financial austerity measures) but also arguably ‘bad politics’ because of widespread damage to their political capital. Even operational level policy may be subject to a similar tension. One such instance occurred on ‘Black Saturday’, when bushfires in the Australian state of Victoria took 173 lives. Police Commissioner Christine Nixon left the Victorian emergency coordination centre to dine with friends at the height of the episode. She felt there was no operational reason to be present and take control of both the command centre and personnel who were already trained for such events, but she did not account for the political backlash that would see her vilified for appearing to trivialise the magnitude of events (Nixon, 2011).

Noble Intentions vs Bad Policy

As detailed earlier in this paper, it is easy to see what inaction may be a noble, legitimate and useful tactic, because it has the potential to bring a range of benefits from ‘buying time’ to awaiting on further evidence of the problem. Yet aside from policy makers working in contexts where there are strong citizen and media expectations for intervention, inaction may also be highly problems in policy terms. Inaction in the hope that the problem will become clearer or may even dissipate, could prove to be the opposite. The problem may become more complex, more politicised and more difficult to manage because it has been left to take a course that government did not envisage.

Appearance of Neutrality vs. Exercise of Power

Government refusing to intervene is often portrayed as an apolitical activity, allowing government to ‘stand above’ political conflict. In reality it is a highly political activity because it involves classic issues of power – the allocation and contestation or rights, rewards and losses. Once we move beyond the official rhetoric of government and its role in the policy process, we find multiple alternative explanations of what drives the activities of governments, such as self-interest (rational choice), institutional norms and values (new institutionalism) and coalitions of interests (policy communities, policy monopolies and advocacy coalitions) (for two recent overviews, see Cairney, 2011; John, 2012). Despite such diversity, a common theme is that policy making is shaped by powers which do not conform to the ‘official’ version of events. The corollary is that policy inaction occurs in forums where power is found, wielded and contested. Few are likely to argue, for example, that the failure of states such
as Venezuela and Côte d’Ivoire to act on implementing the Kimberley Processes to prevent ‘blood diamonds’ funding civil conflict, would constitute anything other than politicised inaction. Despite the fact that inaction is often portrayed as a political system rightly distancing itself from conflicts, inaction can have significant consequences which are no less powerful than ‘action’.

**Policy Inaction: Towards a Program of Study**

Despite what governments ‘choose not to do’ being a marginal area of study for scholars and analysts of public policy, it is a crucial one. Governments ‘doing nothing’ is a facet of the normal business of governing (from managing policy agendas to refusing to incur additional spending) as well as a product of crisis-type episodes where there is a high propensity for misjudgement and error. Policy inaction brings policy and political risks, tough choices between alternative course of (in)action, and outcomes reflecting the distribution and contestation of power. ‘Doing nothing’ is at heart a political activity and it should be examined as such. We conclude therefore by identifying some potentially fruitful issues for further examination. They are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

1. How do we understand the nature and scale of collective energies that are required to ‘do nothing’? Policy makers and their advisors sometimes work very hard to ‘produce’ policy inaction. And sometimes they really want to ‘do something’ but in the end ‘nothing’ gets done anyway. These evident imbalances between energy and outputs in the policy process are as yet ill understood.

2. Where does the most prominent locus of inaction lie: in the legislative, executive or even the judicial realms? Where are veto powers located? How are they exploited and legitimised?

3. Is policy inaction bad? More broadly: what standards should we use to evaluate policy vacuums? This is important because many (and apparently conflicting) standards may be used. If we give high normative value to the appearance of intervention and being ‘present’ and ‘active’, not-acting easily becomes a stain on the reputation of policymakers. Correspondingly, if we value policymakers weighing up a series of risks and benefits as a precursor to a decision (to act or not), then inaction could be considered an appropriate response which avoids the dangers of rushing to judgement before the full facts or know, or engaging in ‘knee jerk’ policy reactions.

4. Is inaction becoming more likely? We increasingly live in an era of ‘real-time’ politics, where politicians/governments face overwhelming pressure to ‘act’ - and act fast - in the face of dramatized depictions of unacceptable social conditions. And action-wanting citizens have been empowered through the internet and the social media. Yet at the same time, existing institutional arrangements of public policymaking often create constraints on swift, concerted action to address pressing problems.
5. Are some policy sectors more likely to produce policy vacuums than others? Most scholars of public policy recognise cross-sectoral variations in policy style, pace and content. Therefore, we need to know more inter-sector variations and propensities for inaction.

6. How do we study inaction in a detailed, empirical fashion? Can we 'observe', measure and evaluate in the same way for example that we study electoral behaviour? Such issues involve engaging with classic social science issues of ontology, epistemology and methodology, but they also reach into the heart of the policy sciences, which generally finds it easier to engage with the tangible rather than fuzzier realms of hidden agendas, unexercised power and more.

Bibliography


