Explaining the policy impact of the 1991 and the 2000 firework blasts in the Netherlands by the core of six policy change models

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Summary

This paper presents an analysis of the aftermaths of two disastrous firework blasts from a policy change perspective. The causes of both disasters were largely identical. Both were extensively investigated and the findings disseminated. After an explosion in 1991, hardly any change in policy occurred, while in comparison the 2000 explosion led to gigantic changes; external security developed as a policy issue and very rapidly became top priority. Viewed from this perspective, our cases can be considered not as similar but as extremes.

The analysis is structured by applying six policy change models, some of which have already earned their place in policy science. The models are the theory of the policy generations (De Vries, 1999), the network-instrument model (Bressers and O’Toole 1998), the stream model of the policy process (Kingdon 1984, 1995), the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999), the punctuated-equilibrium model (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) and the elements of governance model (Bressers and Kuks 2003).

The core change mechanisms typical of each of the six models are set out, followed by an assessment of whether these can successfully explain stability or change in respect of our cases. The analysis is closed by reflecting on the consequences of the analysis for modelling policy change. In particular, the relation between policy subunit configurations and core change mechanisms is elaborated.

1. Introduction

In the fall of 2004 the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment (VROM) funded a project of ours that examined the aftermath of the firework disaster that occurred in Enschede in 2000. Our principal conclusion was that the situation regarding legal fireworks had become considerably safer in the period 2000–2005, throughout the entire process chain, comprising manufacture, import, transport, storage and the use of fireworks. A significant side-effect occurred, however, that occasioned the second main conclusion: The policy in respect of recognised firework companies is so harsh as to have created a significant incentive for illegality and criminality. This gives reason to doubt whether, on balance, matters have indeed become safer.

2000? We elaborated the question: Which mechanisms of governance contributed to the changes in policy and practice after the disaster and how stable are such changes?

A large part of policy science is concerned with policy change. Some theories are devoted primarily to the small, daily changes, which can also be seen as the practical side of the policy process. Their concern is the way in which and the conditions under which individual decisions are made during the shaping and implementation of policy. Examples of such theories are the incrementalism of Lindblom (1959, Braybrooke & Lindblom 1963/1970), Allisson’s (1971) three analytical models, Elinor Ostrom’s (1999) institutional analysis and development model and the contextual interaction theory proposed by one of the present authors (Bressers 2004). Other theories, however, seek to explain policy changes and policy practice as a whole and, moreover, over the longer term. The latter theories are most important in the case of the present study. We selected six of them for the analysis of our case study.

In this paper we provide a summary presentation of the case and relate the highlights of policy processes after the explosions in sections 2 – 4, and then go on to assess our case in the context of six models in sections 5 – 10. Finally, we draw some conclusions in section 11.

2. Fireworks, risks and accidents

On 14 February 1991 there was an explosion of fireworks stored in a firework factory in Culemborg, causing very serious material damage as well as 17 casualties, two of them fatal. Extensive inquiries were made into the cause of the explosion. More fireworks were stored than the license permitted and the risks had been underestimated. Some types of powerful fireworks can be susceptible to mass explosion, meaning that there is a danger of an explosion occurring virtually simultaneously throughout an entire charge. A principal role was played by incorrect labelling of the power of the heavy fireworks. The quality of the licensing system and supervision were called into question. While this gave an insight into the factors that explained the size of the explosion, the actual cause itself could not be determined with certainty (TNO-PML, 2001). The incident fell rapidly from prominence. There was no question of serious pressure – either from government or the media – while neither the regulations nor compliance changed. Questions about conditions in the firework industry were asked in parliament once again in the mid-1990s. The responsible minister gave a tepid response: while there was an acknowledgement that things were not especially transparent, there was no support for the necessary international approach. So on the face of it, nothing changed. After 1991 both the government and the firework industry introduced initiatives to improve the safety situation, but – for reasons to be analysed later – they never really ‘got down to brass tacks’.

But on 13 May 2000, Enschede experienced a major explosion, with far more serious consequences: 22 dead, 947 injured, 450 homes destroyed and 1500 damaged, with material damage exceeding € 550,000,000 (www.13mei2000.nl). The disaster daily grabbed the attention of both media and politicians. In order to restore the peace – to some degree, at least – to recuperate and to guarantee that there could be no conceivable ‘cover up’ operations surrounding the causes and responsibilities, a national Committee of Inquiry, the Commissie Onderzoek Vuurwerkramp, was rapidly appointed. This Committee investigated the disaster, advised on improvements and had available to it virtually unlimited means to accomplish its task.
The firework industry also responded to these conditions, but it is not certain if that was always to the benefit of safety. Those involved in the business described the situation as ‘blind panic’, resulting in a whole series of ad-hoc reactions in the firework industry and in the relationships between government and the industry. One example related to the nocturnal transport of fireworks from another storage location just after the disaster. Residents in the neighbourhood talked of a number of lorries and the unusual movement, in the middle of the night round a storage site. Not so strange, given that there were some 12 other sites where between 150 and 1800 tons of fireworks were stored and given the public’s concern.

But what happened after that? Very briefly, the Committee of Inquiry came to the conclusion that the roles played by the company and government showed similarities to those that had explained the size of the explosion in Culemborg. Serious blame attached to the Enschede local authority, related to the way it performed its task as authority empowered under the Environmental Management Act [Wet Milieubeheer]. SE Fireworks, the business that had blown up, seemed to have had very many defects in terms of the quality of their licensing – where indeed such licenses existed – both related to the storage of fireworks and supervision. The ‘bunker complex’ in which fireworks were stored, for example, was not constructed according to the drawings in the building permit, issued in 1976. This also held for a working area and a repackaging area, which formed part of the drawings. For the victims, the nastiest shock was the possibility that a hole that had been bored through the fire-resistant wall and left open, played a crucial part in the escalation of a ‘simple’ fire into a major disaster. The hole was about 7 cm in diameter and was bored allow the passage of a water pipe (Commissie onderzoek vuurwerkkramp 2001a). In the ensuing period the company also received permission from the local authority to store fireworks in seven prefabricated concrete garages, which had been placed and taken into use. The local authority did, however, impose a limit on the quantity of fireworks to be stored. The prefabricated concrete garages, though, did not comply with the fire safety regulations incorporated in the Nuisance Act [Hinderwet] licence, as well as in the company’s later licence under the Environmental Management Act. Since 1989 it appears that shipping containers had also been added, in which fireworks were stored. In 1997 the Enschede local authority issued a licence, legalising three such containers and thus allowing them on grounds of the Environmental Management Act. A Ministry of Defence inspection in 1998 actually revealed the presence of seven containers. Ultimately, in 1999, the company received a licence under the Environmental Management Act permitting 14 containers. At the time of the explosion there were 16. The local authority’s actions in respect of licensing and inspection gives the impression of indecisiveness, “band-aid solutions”, and a preparedness within the authority to legalise situations that were illegal under zoning plans, building permits and environmental licences. These frequently involved illegal expansion by the company. The picture also arises of inadequate licensing conditions, certainly in respect of fire security, related inter alia to the fire-resistance of the containers, the demands imposed on the prefabricated garages, etc.

Initially, it was mainly only consumer fireworks that were stored in the garages and containers. But when the company developed towards professional fireworks, thus storing a great deal of powerful fireworks, possibly susceptible to mass explosions, the prefabricated garages were also used to store the more powerful goods – which, incidentally, were often misclassified as ‘light’. This mislabelling swindle played a significant role and was occasion for a ‘chain approach’.

*Mislabelling*
The risks associated with a firework product are classified according to international agreements on the transport of hazardous materials. There are a large number of hazardous materials and fireworks are just one of the explosive products. In terms of declining hazard, fireworks are classified as 1.1 to 1.4. The product must be allocated the correct hazard subcategory and be labelled accordingly. It is precisely this classification and labelling system that is subject to fraud on a major scale, as suggested above. Investigations after the Enschede firework disaster found that fireworks for the Netherlands that had been produced in China were usually grouped into subcategories 1.4S or 1.4G. The Oosting Committee concluded that a considerable part of the firework stocks held by SE Fireworks, the company involved, was incorrectly categorised and that the potential effects and hazards were thus underestimated (Commissie onderzoek vuurwerkramp 2001a). The Oosting Committee seriously doubted whether the Chinese producers classified the fireworks on the basis of tests. Furthermore, media reports appeared after the disaster in Enschede, suggesting that the Display Fireworks Association (Vereniging Evenementenvuurwerk, VEN) had since 1997 been aware that SE Fireworks had indeed had their Chinese suppliers label ‘hazardous’ fireworks as ‘harmless’. At a VEN meeting on 17 April 1997, the then owner of SE Fireworks stated that he was experiencing problems with the Chinese manufacturers, who were supplying increasing quantities of subcategory 1.3. He was able to ensure that henceforth the lowest hazard category, 1.4, would be used (Knap 2001). In interviews, experts confirmed that such misleading practices, which had once again surfaced in regard to the SE Fireworks disaster, were fairly common as a result of the incentive structure and the quality of supervision. A company’s profits could be seriously impacted if a correct classification were to be given. For example, a shipping container full of powerful fireworks aboard a ship can only be shipped in association with a limited number of other hazardous materials, while preserving the necessary segregation between containers. Moreover, a container full of subcategory 1.4 fireworks with only a small number of subcategory 1.1 is regarded as entirely subcategory 1.1. This makes it attractive to misclassify subcategory 1.1 fireworks. The customer was merely able to tell the manufacturer in the Far East how he wanted the products supplied. This works throughout the entire firework chain, from transport through storage to the end user. Supervision of such fireworks in the Port of Rotterdam and other European ports consisted mainly of a comparison of documents, ‘paper checks’ as they are called. It was impossible to expose the big lie with such checks, as the industry very well knew. As a matter of fact, though, just like a good conjuring act, a lot of people were aware of the great deception. The industry was characterised by widespread deception. Nor did the government departments perform a particularly glorious role. A division of the Ministry of Defence was the advisor to local authorities granting permits for storage facilities for explosive materials and also functioned as inspector, together with the local authority. Furthermore, the service was also directly involved in the investigation of the Culemborg explosion. Evidently the service had found no occasion to sound the alarm and start inspecting other firework businesses (Commissie onderzoek vuurwerkramp 2001a). Moreover, the National Transport Inspectorate of the Ministry of Transport and Public Works, which supervised the transport, delivery and use of professional fireworks, had been downsized in the 1990s to such an extent that there is some doubt about whether this can be categorised as thorough supervision. Typical of the situation at SE Fireworks was that, in a check performed in 1997, the inspector of the then National Transport Inspectorate did not notice that the company’s mandatory delivery and use permits had expired three years before. In 1999 an inspector noted that more fireworks were stored than permitted, but did nothing (Commissie onderzoek vuurwerkramp 2001a). The Committee ascertained that the Ministry of Transport and Public Works, Transport Safety Directorate, was aware – or at least could have been aware – of the issue of the classification of fireworks, thanks to its participation as a member of the relevant CPR (Commissie
Preventie Rampen, Disaster Prevention Committee) working group, plus the availability of a memorandum from the Ministry of the Interior on the matter, dated 13 June 1991. Even after the Culemborg explosion had been discussed by the CPR, they had neglected to request the inquiry reports. This, among other things, could have given occasion to take a closer look at the combined effects of different types of fireworks (Commissie vuurwerk ramp 2001a).

Experts from the industry and government, when interviewed, were of the opinion that maybe things were very rough at Enschede, but that elsewhere the firework storage situation was far from satisfactory and safe. Defects in the regulations, control structure and culture were not just confined to Enschede. Between 1991 and 2000 little or nothing had changed, which gives every reason to analyse why.

3. After Culemborg: Interdepartmental snarl-ups

In the view of the Oosting Committee, the TNO-PML (1991) investigation of the Culemborg explosion should have led to the following lessons:
- if a small quantity of category 1.1 fireworks is stored together with a less dangerous category, the force of any explosion that may occur would be governed by the total quantity of explosive material present;
- fireworks are sometimes wrongly classified on delivery;
- some types of fireworks, classified as category 1.3, react in the freight packaging as category 1.1;
- the hazard classification of powerful fireworks can change when they are unpacked for processing or assembly;
- given the observed effect distances, the safety zones for powerful fireworks in effect at that time were incorrect;
- thorough periodic inspection of the storage and handling of powerful fireworks is necessary;
- better co-ordination is needed between the organs of government involved in licensing and supervision of businesses that store, handle and/or assemble powerful fireworks;
- inadequate manpower and/or expertise is available in the institutions tasked with monitoring compliance with the regulations.

But very little happened in the aftermath of the Culemborg explosion in 1991: [quote] “This TNO-PML report reached the Ministry of Defence because at that time the Ministry advised on the licensing of fireworks companies. The environmental permit service of this Ministry did not regard it as its task actually to draft stricter regulations. The Accident Prevention, Hazardous Materials department of the Ministry of the Interior did attempt to place the TNO conclusions on the agenda of the so-called CPR Committee. The Ministry of the Interior man wanted to have the lessons of Culemborg 1991 placed on this committee’s agenda, but it was unfortunate that this official’s department was part of the Fire Department directorate and the fire service at that time was considered mainly to know about firefighting. That staff in the Fire Department might also possibly have some expertise in risk management apparently did not occur to the other members of the Committee” (Van Klinken 2001). According to the Oosting Committee, the Fire Department of the Ministry of the Interior had drafted the memorandum referred to earlier, dated 13 June 1991, in response to the TNO-PML report, which had been considered in the CPR Committee. The Oosting Committee further concluded that, even after the memorandum had been considered by the CPR Committee, they failed to request the reports of the investigation of the explosion.
In 1993 A General Government Order under the Environmentally Hazardous Materials Act went into effect, regulating consumer fireworks: The Fireworks Order, Environmentally Hazardous Materials Act. This, however, was not a follow-up to the ‘Culemborg’ findings but ‘business as usual’. The machinery for a specific regulation for professional fireworks ground to a halt. There had been a draft proposal to regulate the external security and hazards of institutions since 1993. The legal concept ‘institution’ also covered businesses where fireworks were stored, but no priority was given to fireworks by the co-ordinating Ministry of Public Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment (VROM), but rather to the chemical industry, chemical and fuels storage, transport etc. From the mid-1990s on, a number of initiatives were developed, involving various Ministries as well as the three branch organisations active in the fireworks industry. A serious obstacle was the desire of the Ministry of Justice to get the monitoring of illegal practices regulated right from the start, which was something for which the legitimate industry did not feel itself responsible. The Ministry VROM also saw two separate issues here, which should not be intermixed. The then current neo-corporate model of policy formation was directed towards achieving consensus and keeping everybody ‘on board’, which gives us an insight into the delay.

It can thus be understood that on 13 May 2000, regulation consisted principally of generic environmental regulations under which the local authority, and under special circumstances the Provincial government, played the leading role. The local authority was the empowered authority for the disaster company SE Fireworks, acting under the Environmental Management Act. Insofar as specific firework-related requirements were concerned, their implementation was not very impressive, while monitoring was scanty.

4. After Enschede: avalanche of change

The composition of the Firework Disaster Investigation Committee was far broader than the competent investigation conducted by TNO-PML after Culemborg, as a result of both governmental and public disquiet. The Committee was instituted on 26 May 2000 and reported 9 months later in the form of an approximately 2000 page report.

In the interim, incidentally, there had been a great deal of ad hoc activity in such areas as monitoring and compliance: inspectors were literally getting under each other’s feet; there were border controls and a different border regime, etc. A lot changed, even while the investigation was going on, with preparations being made for new regulations, for example. Moreover, the distribution of tasks involved in licensing, monitoring and compliance were radically changed. Many of the final recommendations were implemented; sometimes the government went even further than the recommendations. A great deal was set down in the Fireworks Order 2002, which laid down regulations for the entire fireworks chain. The voluntary nature – and with it the ease of manipulation – of the classification disappeared in favour of a system comprising a default list and an authorisation system for the classification, supported by test requirements. Until such time as the new regime went into effect, incidentally, there was an interim arrangement in Dutch ports, which meant that all fireworks for which no authorisation based on test data could be produced were regarded as fireworks of the most powerful category. The Fireworks Order also laid down rules for reporting, procedures and record keeping upon import, classification and labelling of fireworks, storage requirements, reporting and recording of transport and storage etc. The Netherlands also went the rounds internationally in a pioneering attempt to get the UN to improve the classification system referred to above, principally the authorisation and verification of classifications and labels.
Our mission here is not to detail all the changes, but rather, given that the changes were ultimately very radical, to go into the characteristics of the process. In common with other changes and interim measures, experts state that the Fireworks Order came into being in a very unusual way. There was little or no discussion with the fireworks industry and its representatives. The industry had the idea that the Minister responsible at the VROM Ministry, Jan Pronk, would have preferred to have banned the professional fireworks sector in its entirety, but, given the support available, he had to be satisfied with tightening the thumbscrews as far as possible. According to noises from the sector, the top-down approach was particularly powerful; it is a fact that the co-ordinating VROM Ministry and the fireworks industry have only recently once again been on speaking terms. But the neo-corporatism between the Ministries stopped, too. The VROM Ministry and Minister Pronk decided to go it alone when putting the regular fireworks industry’s house in order. The insider view is that Jan Pronk – a tough, high-profile, polarising, experienced and internationally oriented politician (recently UN Special Envoy to Sudan/Darfur) – was more or less bored at the VROM Ministry with national environmental topics. He viewed the ‘fireworks disaster’ and in a wider sense ‘external security’ as a major policy issue into which he could set his teeth, in the shadow of great political and media attention, also in an international setting. Under the umbrella of the Oosting Committee decisiveness was demanded and a change of political style in order to achieve such decisiveness was easy to achieve. This changed style was to relax only after 2005. Moreover, slightly more than six months after the firework disaster, on 1 January 2001, while the Oosting Committee was still sitting, the commotion and uproar increased once again. During the New Year celebrations, the bar Het Hemeltje in Volendam burned down, with the loss of 14 lives and more than 150 injured. A customer had touched off a party firework, a sparkler, and thereby set light to the bar’s Christmas decorations. Here too, inadequate supervision of fire security played a significant role.

5. Theory of policy generations

The theory of policy generations states that [quote] in successive periods, separate policy generations can be distinguished, characterised by the dominance of certain values and the neglect of others. The theory predicts convergence of policy within periods and great differences between such periods, since new policy generations will be inclined to emphasise those values that were most neglected in previous periods [end quote] (De Vries 1999: 207). There is no mention of ‘shocking occurrences’, rather a ‘growing consciousness of a neglect of values’. Factors that play a role: in this approach, the theoretical explanation of the transition from one generation to the next distinguishes between macro-level explanations (such as the existing cultural, political and economic preconditions), meso-level explanations, in particular the copying of successful policy elsewhere, and micro-level explanations, especially a new generation of policy actors.

This approach is not especially suitable to explain the present case. The difficulty is that the theory assumes that what is at issue are values and generations of policy that are emphasised over the whole line and for longer periods, i.e. simultaneously in many policy areas and for periods of a decade or longer. Our case is concerned with explosions in Culemborg in 1991 and Enschede in 2000. Although it tells us little, we could approach the lack of change due to the Culemborg explosion in terms of the observation that the time for change had not yet come. But at the micro-level that isn’t true; after all, some actors were very conscious that safety was being neglected. It is impossible to maintain this view for the radical changes after Enschede. That would mean that firework safety policy had changed partly because the topic
of safety as such had become a prime issue that had previously been neglected. This is not true without qualification. True, after the Enschede disaster in 2000 it was clear that there was a wave of attention to many aspects of safety, but they had their roots in the past, in terms of security from street violence and other types of criminal behaviour, transport safety and industrial safety. Domestic incidents that played a role include the crash of a Boeing 747 on the Bijlmermeer in 1992 (at least 43 fatalities), the failure of assistance provided to a fire in a landing C-130 Hercules aircraft in Eindhoven (they started to extinguish the flames rather than rescue the passengers, 32 fatalities) and legionnaire’s disease in 1999 (32 fatalities, more than 200 victims, mostly with long-term damage). The expansion into external security after 2000 cannot be viewed in isolation from the firework disaster and the fire in the Voldendam bar. Which, as regards the causes of the changes, brings us back to the incidents themselves and not any pendulum swings in general societal attention. Recently added dimensions regarding risk and security policy, bird ’flu and other epidemics, terrorism, religious extremism etc., are comparable additions. Does that then collectively form a policy generation that is slowly rolling out? Nor have we observed any ‘pendulum swing’ in attention.

Another way of reasoning within this model might emphasise that the concept of governance has changed from neo-corporatist to top-down regulation, excluding the industry and even other ministries as partners in the discussion. It would be difficult to maintain, though, that such a development can be observed over the entire front – or even large areas – of sustainability policy, environmental policy, or even security policy. The degree of regulation in these sectors was far too great before then, and the assumed decline in the implementation of covenants and self-regulation could scarcely be perceived post facto. Talking to each other – the ‘polder model’ – is still in full spate in very many related policy areas. The empirical domain of the firework case is probably to narrow in comparison with the broad significance assigned to the term ‘policy generation’ for us to be able to use this model satisfactorily for our purpose.

Nevertheless, the importance of values and their effects, and the notion of neglected values, a pendulum swing in societal attention to certain values, which has a broad influence on policy generations, seems to be too attractive for models of change to reject on the basis of a single empirical case. Where the Advocacy Coalition Model, which we go into later, focuses on the competition between values at the same moment in time, De Vries concentrates on competition between values in a longitudinal perspective.

6. The network-instrument model

The idea underlying the network-instrument model (Bressers 1995; Bressers & O'Toole 1998; Ligteringen 1999) is that new policy options will commonly only confirm the existing situation in terms of the intensity of the mutual interaction between the organisations and persons in the policy network as also the mutual respect for each other’s principal objectives. These two network characteristics are termed interconnectedness and cohesion, respectively. In this way, the policy approach and the way in which the various persons and institutions in the network interact are mutually supportive of each other. Of course, such a situation is never entirely static. External circumstances and deliberate attempts can disturb the equilibrium, but they will have to overcome resistance. The key hypothesis is therefore: a different policy approach will have to be preceded by changed relations between the various persons and institutions in the policy network, or will at least be accompanied by them. So this is about the intensity of mutual interactions between the institutions in the policy network and the degree of mutual respect for each other’s principal goals.
Post-Culemborg, in 1991, these factors changed remarkably little; in fact, the messenger from the Fire Service, with his potentially valuable, correct contribution, was treated as if he were Don Quixote, while no attention was given to the possible correctness of his message.

After the Enschede disaster it is clear that the changes certainly were accompanied by a change in the characteristics of the policy network and therefore, in that sense, the model is confirmed. But the changes in the network characteristics can certainly not be seen as a cause of the policy changes. It was rather a matter of contemporaneous, deliberate government choice to adopt a more remote stance from the firework industry when framing its new policy, since the industry could form an obstacle to decisiveness and innovation. Insofar as there was any ‘lock in’, in the sense that the characteristics of the network are normally reconfirmed by the choice of policy instruments in the network, then in this case we can speak of a genuine breakthrough.

The model does make sense, insofar as it predicts that a lower score on ‘interlinkage’ and ‘attachment’ is accompanied by a choice of instruments dominated by direct regulation from the top down and the absence of consultation. Moreover, to the subsequent question on policy change – viz., how stable it will be – in this case the model gives us only a general indication. The changes in the network characteristics do not in fact appear to be unequivocally permanent. After the initial reduction in the intensity of the interaction, mutual respect and trust, it seems that now, albeit hesitantly, things are on the road back. The model predicts that this will increase the likelihood that instruments directed towards self-regulation and agreements will start to be employed as part of the mix. Time alone will show whether or not that is the case.

7. The stream model of the policy process

Policy formation is not always an orderly process; sometimes it seems more like rotting in a rubbish bin (cf. the garbage can model of Cohen et al. 1972), where a haphazard range of conditions come together to make it possible: digestible refuse, moisture, air. The stream model of the policy process (Kingdon 1995 (1984)) builds on this and draws attention to the coming together of three, relatively autonomous streams, every time a decision is arrived at. Political ‘entrepreneurs’ promote this confluence by using (or even creating) ‘windows of opportunity’ by which the three streams can be combined. These three streams comprise problem perceptions, ideas about policy options, and the political ‘salience’ for voters and their elected representatives, as well, of course, as the people who emphasise each of these three streams, or parts of them. Kingdom understands these three streams more as perceptions than actualities (Zahariadis 1999: 74–78). While the stream model is not concerned specifically with policy change, it is relevant because it assumes that systems change continuously and do not necessarily end up in a static equilibrium. The model’s point of departure is that decision makers’ ideas are ambiguous, which means that different ways of thinking are maintained simultaneously on the same matters, and that this introduces confusion, vagueness, and tension. The external impulses are also multifaceted and confusing. So what is crucial is what one pays attention to, and when. Time is a very limited resource.

And so the picture arises of a stream of attention to a variety of matters over time and the expectation that action will only be undertaken if the necessary ingredients come together simultaneously. Such a moment is called a ‘policy window’ or ‘window of opportunity’. Ideologies play a major role in directing attention because they give direction – albeit not very
precisely – to the thinking and argumentation with others, even when there is uncertainty about a variety of conditions. Ideologies consist of a mish-mash of interactions between fundamental ideas and interests. Nevertheless, Kingdom expects that the windows of opportunity will never remain open for long. Any number of reasons could ensure that they close rapidly once again, when attention will be directed to the next point, in any case in one of the necessary streams. One such reason is that the crisis or media frenzy is over and its salience has ebbed among the public and policy shapers.

All in all, the image that this theory gives us is that policy change certainly doesn’t have be thought anything exceptional, even though it often will have a certain degree of happenstance and unpredictability (example: why no real new policy after Culemborg?), but that there is a great likelihood that policy change will once again be overtaken by other changes and it is therefore highly uncertain whether it will achieve any degree of permanence in later stages.

In the Culemborg case there was no political salience. It is obvious that the Enschede firework disaster gave prominence to the issue, while the political interest remained acute for some time: this plays a role in all theories. It would be more specific for this theory if there had been an enduring, independent stream of ideas for measures: “solutions looking for problems and support”, and that the coming together of these streams were the occasion for policy formation. But there seems to be no question of this. The approach changed direction radically after the disaster, replacing an attempt to gain consensus with the industry by top-down regulation. But for that, according to various spokespersons, there was certainly no blueprint available, either at home or abroad, and certainly none for the technical aspects of regulation and implementation. By no means all solutions were known in advance. Moreover, the great haste led to a series of flaws in the new regulations, which subsequently had to be repaired. This too speaks against the notion that the solution was lying ready to hand. Nor had the Netherlands’ international initiative existed earlier. It arose out of the firework disaster, the search for solutions, given the perception of the problem, and the support for a radical approach. It seems clear that the policy changed within a context of available support, but in the absence of much knowledge about solutions. The policy changes after the firework disaster in this case can then be more informatively explored using other models.

What the ‘stream model of the policy process’ can do in some cases is give us a very effective description and understanding of how problems and solutions come together in a very pragmatic way in the course of implementation. An example is that the Ministry of Transport and Public Works had for years been in talks with the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment (VROM) with the aim of transferring their tasks related to firework display businesses and the supply and use licences. The Oosting Committee noted that these tasks were not being performed effectively and thereby supplied the problem definition. Then there arose the ‘problem’ that the VROM Ministry, being the policy co-ordinating Ministry, had been landed with the matter post-disaster, came very quickly and smoothly into contact with the ‘solution’ of the Ministry of Transport and Public Works, which ultimately wished to divest itself of the task. A second example relates to the problem of storing professional fireworks, for which a solution had to be found after it was decided to introduce wider safety zones around vulnerable objects. The solution – storage abroad in vacant complexes dating from the Cold War – rolled off the shelf because the aspiring operators were actively seeking contractors. So we can see how problems and pragmatic solutions sometimes encounter each other very smoothly, whereby some players do indeed just ‘pick a solution off the shelf and sell it’ as soon as the opportunity arises.
8. The advocacy coalition framework

The main goals of the advocacy-coalition framework are to gain a greater insight into long-term policy change and the role played by technical information (expert knowledge) in the policy process (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1999: 117). The period concerned is a decade or more, because Sabatier believes that clear patterns only become visible after such a time. The ‘advocacy coalition’ is not the governing coalition of ruling parties, but rather a group of actors, from within government and outside, who share common convictions and who co-ordinate their behaviour to a considerable degree (Sabatier 1988, 1991). Commonly, more than one advocacy coalition is active in one policy sector – the ‘political subsystem’ – but often one predominates over the others. One can usually distinguish three to four coalitions.

Characteristic of each coalition are its political convictions (‘policy beliefs’) and resources. A number of layers can be distinguished in the actors’ policy beliefs. The ‘deep core’ consists of such matters as fundamental values. The ‘policy core’ contains standpoints related to the problem perception, distribution of the costs of conducting the policy, the desirability of expert input, and the general public and other relevant values and preferences. The ‘secondary aspects’ involve the consequences in a given situation. The ‘glue’ between members of a coalition is their shared beliefs, especially at the level of the policy subunit-specific ‘policy core’ (the deep core is not policy-subunit-specific). The coalition uses the resources available to it to develop strategies and instruments. The actors in the subsystem are influenced by resources and limitations external to the subsystem, which in turn stem from more or less stable conditions and more dynamic factors elsewhere in the system. The key point about the ACF is that it is an approach based on ideas and beliefs.

This model has been developed in a context of politicised, pluriform relationships between politics, government and society. This context – aimed at the USA – is further characterised by the absence of government coalitions. This creates good conditions for an open battle, in which each ‘round’ is seen as a relatively independent fight. This touches on one of the fundamental objections to the application of the advocacy coalition framework to policy portfolios in such countries as the Netherlands. The model is concerned with a pluriform, open society with free access to the policy system and knowledge brokers who can influence coalition formation. In actuality, in the Netherlands one can speak of a neo-corporatist model in which players make conscious assessments of the short-term gain from polarisation – playing extreme standpoints off against each other – as against the long-term loss resulting, for example, from no longer being accepted as a partner at the negotiating table. Characteristic of the neo-corporatist system – or ‘polder model’ – is precisely the belief that everybody will in the long term be better off striving for consensus rather than deliberately setting out to seek confrontation, battle and victory (Lulofs 2002, Lulofs & Hoppe 2003). There is after all a risk that parties that lay too great a stress on politicisation – by conducting public campaigns and battles, for example – will be closed off from deliberations.

Setting this discussion to one side for the moment, fundamental policy changes require changes in the deep core (highly unlikely) and/or the policy core (unlikely). In this view, such changes do not occur in a given area of policy unless one advocacy coalition is replaced by another or else changes can be forced through from above. In general, this does not happen unless external conditions change dramatically (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1999: 124). The two most significant ‘causative factors’ are thus stated to be the fundamental values of the coalition’s members (a highly stabilising factor) and ‘external disturbances’ (a factor that may possibly lead to change) (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1999: 151). We do not, however, get to
learn much about the possible effects of ‘shocking occurrences’. This still doesn’t say much about the way in which possibly fundamental changes actually arise. Far more work within this theory has, however, been done on less fundamental changes. This is related mainly to ‘policy-oriented learning’, where experiences in other sectors or areas generate new ideas (cf. De Vries’s meso-level). So what we retain from this theory is mainly the concept of policy beliefs: changes will be accompanied by changes in more or less fundamental convictions of the members of the dominant advocacy coalition, or else by replacement of the dominant coalition by another.

It must be clear that none of these conditions occurred after Culemborg. But why not? A simple explanation is given by the advocacy-coalition framework. The only relevant service that actually learned something from the investigation reports that appeared after the Culemborg explosion was a single person from the Ministry of the Interior, who genuinely delved into the matter and the reports. Evidently the Ministry of the Interior representative did not form part of a coalition able in any way to make a powerful showing, and in the neo-corporatist system a result like this is simply set aside, unless other venues are sought and used in a non-polarising way. If one extends the line from the Culemborg explosion until after the Enschede disaster, no trace of a pre-existing, rival coalition can be found; rather there is an improvised ‘flight to the front’. Departing from the rule of thumb upheld by Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, one can doubt whether there was any question, within the policy subsystem, of mutually competitive advocacy coalitions. One might possibly distinguish three coalitions: departments in the VROM Ministry with inspectors who opted for regulation, some organisations in the industry and specialists who found self-regulation attractive, and services of the Ministry of Justice, the police and suchlike who advocated greater attention to illegal fireworks. But they were not fighting for gain as the model suggests: they ‘poldered’. The firework portfolio was viewed as a minor safety issue with little ‘public value’, which could be left to the lower echelons at the VROM Ministry. At that level they ‘poldered’ with others of their ilk and progress was very limited. This is not merely a consequence of conflicting interests, but mainly also due to the fact that the solutions sought must be acceptable to all parties.

So the dominant coalition was not displaced. In the absence of this explanatory mechanism, the fundamental convictions of the dominant coalition – at least at the policy core level – must have changed. This would seem to be the case, up to a point. Prior to the disaster, the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment (VROM) had drafted a few rules for consumer fireworks, but had made no progress on drafting rules for the professional variety. Government initiatives and self-regulation initiatives from the industry itself ran into the sand for a variety of reasons. None of the parties sought confrontation; they all preferred to stay at the table to talk further from time to time. After the firework disaster, though, all that ‘poldering’ was over. There was a fundamental change of opinion on the way the firework industry should be governed. The existing, broad, ‘poldering’ coalition was thinned down to a smaller, dominant coalition of actors, all of whom had earlier been converted to wanting drastic restrictions on the regular fireworks industry. An interesting side-effect was the shutting out, not only of the industrial organisations but also the previous polder coalitions, which had been proportionately more in favour of regulation, albeit with particular attention to illegal fireworks. It was as late as 2005 before we saw these actors regaining any foothold on terra firma once again.

Specifically in times of uncertainty and crisis, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith state that the competing coalitions could associate in a temporary ‘grand coalition’, in which those involved
cease battle for the time being, but in this specific case we see exactly the opposite. The new policy beliefs that were espoused by a large number of the actors gained immediate dominance, rapidly and painlessly leaving behind those few who did not go along with them.

Another specific of the Advocacy Coalition Framework is the notion of ‘policy learning’, which results in less radical changes. This would actually appear to be more the result of policy change than its cause. The same holds for the replacement of some actors by others. Moreover, scarcely anyone could be found who regarded the revised policy as anything other than a fundamental change.

All in all, the advocacy coalition framework does not really appear to be adequate to give a thorough explanation of policy changes after a seismic shock, unless rival coalitions of actors are already in existence, possessing good ideas that link up with the newly recognised ‘reality’ and which take over power from the old policy network. In the case of a stable, neo-corporatist policy-formulating configuration, we are offered few straws to grasp at.

9. The punctuated equilibrium model

The punctuated equilibrium model of Baumgartner & Jones (1993) seeks an explanation for what is commonly termed a simple observation: political processes often seem to be stable for a long time, but sometimes large-scale changes occur. Both stability (commonly) and change (sometimes) are important aspects of the policy process. While most theories seem to provide satisfactory explanations either for stability or change, this model seeks to explain both (True, Jones & Baumgartner 1999: 97). To this end, they use concepts from the systems approach and evolutionary theory. Periods of equilibrium and stability occur when a topic is dominated by what they call a subsystem, but what is more commonly termed a ‘network of actors’. That equilibrium is disturbed when the topic comes onto the ‘macro-political’ agenda.

In such a case, even small changes (as well, of course, as what they call ‘a mighty blow’) in the objective conditions can ensure major shifts due to ‘positive feedback’ processes. Normally, counterforces are evoked when something happens that strays too far from the norm. This is called ‘negative feedback’. But when such an occurrence actually recruits extra support, the reinforcement increases continuously, and for some time the end is out of sight. This ‘positive feedback’ affords unexpectedly rapid change, such as the collapse of East European communism. The aspect of evolutionary theory involved here is that one change creates more favourable conditions for the next, leading to a chain reaction.

Such earthquakes may be preceded by a mighty blow, or by minor occurrences. To a significant degree this is due to the importance of perceptions, a mix of information and emotion. Changes of perception do not seem to be the consequence of changes in objective conditions, but of a shift of attention. This, of course, can happen very much faster (even though the pre-existing institutions can still provide some resistance to change, cf. Scholten & Timmermans 2004). The example given is that of atomic energy: as long as this is associated with economic progress, certain groups can retain a monopoly on policy development. But when another picture associated with danger and environmental disaster began to emerge, very different players went into action. They do not play according to the old rules; they changed the rules (institutions) themselves. The topic has gained a place on the ‘macro-political’ agenda. This very rapidly affords an opportunity for ‘positive feedback’, turning policy on its head.
While this theory does not need ‘mighty blows’ as such to explain incidental, great changes, it is clear that they form a first-class means to redirect attention, so leading to a chain reaction. More typical of this theory is the hypothesis that such major changes will be accompanied by mutually reinforcing changes in perceptions, the actors involved, and rules of the game. This combination of new relationships will then also persist for a time. Based on this, one should not expect a rapid erosion of policy changes in later stages, such as implementation and penetration.

The punctuated equilibrium model of Baumgartner & Jones (1993) assumes an alternation between stable periods and brief periods of rapid change. Periods of equilibrium and stability persist if the topic is dominated by a ‘subsystem’. Major changes will be accompanied by mutually reinforcing changes in perception, the actors involved, and the rules of the game. This combination will then once again allow the new relationships to persist for a while. Now, different perceptions did arise after Culemborg. For example, investigation of the disaster made it clear that more, and more powerful fireworks were present than were allowed under the licence. The fireworks appeared to have been misclassified. This detail, however, did not change anything in the composition of the actors in the most relevant policy committee, nor the rules of the game that determined the distribution of their mutual influence – something of which the Fire Service representative must have been painfully aware.

Major changes will be accompanied by mutually reinforcing changes of perceptions, the actors involved, and the rules of the game, especially if the topic gets onto the macro-political agenda. This combination will then maintain the new relationships for a while. The changes after Enschede can be described in these terms. The positive reinforcement was, of course, mainly caused by the nature of the investigating committee and the intense attention from media and society. As regards the media, we can see a similar picture after both firework explosions as after two major fires in the catering industry. In a comparison between an earlier (1977) fire in Hotel Polen in Amsterdam (33 dead, 46 injured) and the bar fire in Voldendam (2001), analysis revealed an enormous increase in the reporting of disasters in the public media. The fairly businesslike, remote culture of 1977 stands in contrast to the emotional involvement of 2001. The question of blame, too, is asked with increasing emphasis and greater intensity, even in reports from the ‘serious’ media (http://geschiedenis.vpro.nl/artikelen/25788985/). This comparison makes it clear that it’s not just the length of the casualty list that explains the greater media attention to the Enschede fireworks disaster in comparison with Culemborg.

But it would be premature to think that a new period of stability arrived once again. Both further improvements and relapses – as attention fades – are conceivable.

10 The elements of governance model

The elements of governance model (Bressers & Kuks 2003) draws a less sharp distinction between periods of stability and periods of change. Globally speaking, the mechanisms are the same as those of the Baumgartner & Jones punctuated equilibrium model: stability due to mutual adaptation of elements, given weak or absent external stimuli, and dynamism due to an interaction between changes in the various ‘elements of governance’. This interaction may exist of mutually reinforcing changes – the positive feedback mechanism of Baumgartner & Jones – which ensure rapid, permanent changes. But it is also possible that the composite entities adapt only in part to the external stimuli, ‘encapsulating them’ with minimum adaptation. This will happen if the resistance to change in one or more elements – the negative
feedback – turns out to be stronger than the urge to change. Something like this happens, for instance, when the problem perception does in fact change sharply for a while, but the actors’ position in the policy network is so strong that they do not have to leave the stage. Their original problem definitions will gradually come to dominate policy once again, possibly paying only lip-service to the new problem perception.

Can it actually be the case – as the stream model supposes – that changes themselves are also mutable, so that loss of attention can relatively easily lead to closed ‘policy windows’ at a later stage? Or is it the case that major changes are accompanied by a shift in more stable conditions, coalitions, institutions, etc., and thus have a greater chance of sticking? This sixth model supposes that the five elements of governance that have been distinguished (societal and political scale levels, networks and actors, problem perceptions and goals / ambitions, strategies and instruments, and resources available for policy implementation) each form the others’ context and influence each other (Bressers & Kuks 2003). In the absence of external disruption these elements will tend to adapt to each other. The word ‘disruption’ here actually sounds rather more negative than intended. An external stimulus, besides having the ability to disturb the relationship between the elements, is also important in bringing about the dynamic needed to adapt the manner of governance to the changed reality.

In regard to the internal factors within policy formation that seem to matter, there is little conflict in the models. Some matters are named by all authors, even though their choice of words differs, as may their exact significance. It is true that other matters are named by only one or a few authors, but there is no real reason to suppose that the importance of other elements is thereby excluded. Several key points can be summarised as follows:

1. **The various societal and governmental scales (modern governance systems are often multi-level)**
   Sabatier offers the possibility that a change can just be imposed from above, under condition that a subsystem is nested within a larger system. Baumgartner & Jones talk of scaling up and politicisation under the influence of positive feedback. This indicates that it is important to realise that policy is formed at different levels and meddling ‘from above’ may exist or may be ‘decoupled’ – certainly as far as the impact of external conditions is concerned. In our case we have described how the internal forces in the network were completely overruled when the disaster was politicised and magnified under the influence of the media.

2. **The actors in the policy network (‘multi-actor’)**
   Many of the authors allocate a leading role to the actors and their networks, as well as their characteristics and the competition between them. We have already indicated how much the neo-corporatist organisation of the policy process influenced what happened.

3. **Problem perceptions and ambitions (‘multi-faceted’)**
   The use of such terms as ‘perceptions’, ‘policy beliefs’ and problem perceptions, together with the attention devoted to them by virtually all the authors underscores their importance as factors. This occupies an especially significant position in the neo-corporate organisation of the policy process: differences of perception and different values are not fought out in the open. Rather, they stay muffled in a common drive to keep the decision-making process closed. This could well be extremely resistant to external influence.

4. **Strategies and instruments (‘multi-instrumental’)**
   Solution strategies receive attention mainly as one of Kingdon’s ‘streams’, which have their own dynamic. Bressers’ network-instrument model pays them attention because certain network configurations make it likely that certain instruments will be chosen,
and thus that external changes will encourage the network’s choice of different instruments.

5. The organisation and capacity for implementation (‘multi-resource based’)

Finally, Baumgartner & Jones refer to rules and ‘institutions’ as a resource that may well act to stabilise, but under positive feedback can also play a role in the change. Sabatier also refers to resources, but he does not develop that into an internal factor for change. In the case of a policy network in which it is not the perceptions and values that play a role, but the mutual dependence on resources, this factor can have a highly stabilising effect.

There is a certain ‘logical’ relationship between these five elements of governance. Each element in the chain imposes harsher or milder restrictions or stimulates aspects of the element below it. In that sense, these influences encourage the mutual adaptation of the elements.

We believe that there is no a priori reason within this sixth model to assume that the mutual influences among the elements should be restricted in this way. All elements form contexts for the others and can thereby be both independent and dependent variables. To these belong the influences of the elements of governance itself. The best predictor of the status of an element at t2 is its status at t1. Each change, after all, costs energy and will not occur when the system of governance is at equilibrium. It is also very probable that a changed problem perception exerts an influence first of all at the level of governance at which the matter is taken up (nationally rather than merely locally), whereupon old networks are disrupted to make way for new actors, extra resources being made available for implementation, and new policy instruments developed. The mechanism of mutual adaptation will allow values to tend towards mutual consistency, cognitions will tend to fit into a common interpretive framework, and resources, as institutions, will come to reflect relationships between levels, networks and so on (Bressers & Kuks 2003: 74–82; Kuks 2004: 70–78).

External stimuli may influence one or more of the elements. The same mechanism of mutual adaptation can then lead to changes in all elements of the pattern of governance. This combination of stability (due to convergence in situations devoid of serious external challenge) and dynamism (due to the progress of external impulses to change from one of the elements to the rest of the pattern of governance) links up well with certain theories of policy formation, especially the punctuated equilibrium model. That is why in this sixth model, just as in Baumgartner & Jones (1993), it is surmised that changes in one element can sometimes improve conditions for change in another element, thus initiating a rapid, thoroughgoing chain reaction.

But on the other hand, just as in the stream model, one cannot rule out that the reverse happens and the initial change in one of the elements becomes ‘encapsulated’ by a limited adaptation of other elements, leaving things as far as possible as they were. What is fundamentally important here is the question whether certain more permanent aspects have changed in the first place, such as the composition of the policy network, the mutual relationships between the actors, and the resources, or whether the change merely attracts fleeting attention.

Based on the moment of the firework disaster, such a period takes us back to the previous major fireworks catastrophe in the Netherlands, the explosion of a fireworks factory in Culemborg in 1991. The first thing to strike one is that policy changed very little after this
disaster. It is clear that the initial impulse soon stranded. What actually happened, in terms of
the models? An analysis of the five elements of governance reveals how the encapsulation
occurred. Nothing changed in the levels of scale, the actors in the policy network, strategies
and instruments, and responsibilities and resources for implementation. The impact of the
disaster remained stuck at the element that was primarily influenced: the problem perception
and goal / ambition. In fact, the disaster was regarded by many as an incident, not an occasion
to change the problem perception. The solitary official at the Ministry of the Interior who
thought differently remained isolated in the inter-departmental tribal warfare. The deciding
factor was that neither the media nor the general public made the link between the explosion
in a production factory with the presence of fireworks storage facilities throughout the
country, often considerably closer to dwellings than in Culemborg. The Great Dutch Public
stayed quiet and the politicians did not go into action.

After Enschede, though, all these mechanisms did come into effect. In terms of different
levels of scale, the local disaster had an immediate national effect and became known
throughout the world. The Oosting Committee also looked at the events expressly from a
national perspective. The measures resulting from the disaster transferred tasks from the local
authorities to provincial and national services. The scaling up reached even beyond the
borders, up to the international level, which became a source for the new regulations. This too
played a role, as did the opportunity to displace most of the powerful fireworks to storage
locations beyond little Netherlands’ borders. The shift to higher levels of scale seems on
balance to have contributed to stabilisation of the innovation. The UN and EU rules could
have played an especially large part here. There is also a measure of permanent domestic
centralisation, with greater power at national and provincial levels, to the cost of the local
authority. As has already been stated above, new actors came to occupy a central position in
the policy network, while the relationships in the network changed in nature. The network
became less consensus-minded. Criticism of some actors from the Oosting Committee, inter
alia, ensured they were replaced or their role diminished.

The problem perception and the goals / ambitions experienced a step change over the entire
line. At first sight, of course, the blast wave from the disaster changed things, creating
recognition of the dangers posed by fireworks. This was rapidly translated into a search for
those responsible, the defectiveness of regulations and compliance, and therefore also of
government institutions. Then followed a further generalisation to the ‘external security’ of
hazardous materials and institutions in general, which came to be a matter of concern. The
attention paid to fireworks in the midst of all this was still great. The Fireworks Order
introduced a new instrument, which laid down extremely strict, compulsory (and in the
Netherlands practically infeasible) safety zones, particularly for professional fireworks, to
which, as expected, the scale once again adapted by relocating abroad, as mentioned above.
The Fireworks Order plays a central role in the strategies and instruments of policy, as it set
in train a considerable degree of co-ordination of regulations throughout the country. It also
marked a shift from a partial negotiating strategy to one of regulation. This plays a significant
part in stabilising the improvements to firework safety. The responsibilities and resources for
implementation came to rest principally with central and provincial governments and far less
with the local authorities, as was previously the case, and even then under 2nd line
supervision of the national inspectorate. To facilitate the clearance of fireworks businesses, a
clearance regulation was added that contributed to the costs, if an institution was unable to
fulfil the new requirements. Registers and risk maps were created, and still are. This type of
supervision, too, can be said to have set up positive feedback relationships between these
elements of governance. The part played by the provincial government, for instance, in further
developing and implementing the policy was a great stimulus, while the Fireworks Order created a sound framework for regulating storage.

There are clear links between all these changes. Certainly in the beginning these took the form of ‘mutually reinforcing and facilitating factors’. The seriousness of the fireworks safety issue was first recognised, for example, at the moment that the VROM Ministry – and certainly the then Minister, Pronk – seemed to be searching for a new domestic urgency. As long as the major environmental issues seemed to play out on the international stage, domestic matters seemed to the Minister to be relatively unimportant. Officials cautioned him not to neglect them, though, so as not to lose touch with the Dutch public. In that sense, the fireworks issue, with external security in its wake, was something of a gift.

Besides this activity, it was probably the same fireworks disaster that had so influenced perceptions abroad that made possible something that previous ministers in the mid-1990s had regarded as inconceivable: that other countries – albeit hesitantly – would work together on uniform regulation. The policy network changed its nature, not just its composition. This finds expression in the top-down manner in which the Fireworks Order came into being. There is a dual relationship here with the VROM takeover: on the one hand we have a Ministry that had built up a sterling record during the 1990s by ‘poldering’. So it was not down to VROM, but the Ministry of Justice, that the industry’s earlier attempts at self-regulation were not crowned with an agreement. On the other hand, the Minister of the day was not entirely happy with all those covenants. What finally tipped the scales was probably the high degree of urgency in the problem perception and the accompanying public and media pressure, which demanded rapid, decisive action.

This is how many of the initial developments interlocked. Later changes can be regarded more as ‘mutual adaptations’, in which new situations lead to a gradually improved match between the elements of governance. The remaining challenge is to prevent the new approach from being restricted by and large to the legal sector, while the illegal trade did not receive the attention it deserved. While it has to be said that many matters were still in a state of flux, there seemed to be no threat that the approach to firework safety would become diluted. New rules and actors had allowed it to become institutionalised, at least partially.

11. Discussion

The point upon which the theories appear to differ most is the question of whether the existing policy and policy process is ‘seeking equilibrium’ and can therefore change only under external impulses (cf. the ‘network-instrument’ model) or whether it is rather chaotic and thus subject to constant change, also from within (cf. the ‘stream’ model), or else calls upon its own counterforces after some time (cf. the ‘policy generations’ model). It is in fact also the core of the question that Baumgartner & Jones attempted to treat. In our opinion they succeeded admirably. It’s not one or the other; it’s one and the other. Stabilising forces and therewith a certain resistance to change are the rule, but self-reinforcing and therefore possibly major changes are a ‘normal’, explainable exception. This is a standpoint supported by Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith in the Advocacy Coalition Framework, which also fits into the elements of governance model. It is precisely the interaction between numerous external and internal factors that can explain such a snowball effect. In that regard, media attention to extreme events appears to be an increasingly significant internal factor, further polarising an issue.
It is of course necessary to distinguish radical change – i.e. changes in policy beliefs / policy goals – from what Sabatier calls change of secondary aspects. This comes down to changes in programmes based on ‘policy learning’, which can relate to the programme’s specification and the choice of instruments and implementation (Howlett & Ramesh 1998: 39–40). Now, our case concerns a ‘seismic shock’. For these extreme external events it is first necessary to enlarge the concept of paradigmatic change, adding a sub-category ‘change of policy subsystem configuration’. The ACF predicts that in pluralist policy subsystems, extreme shocks might be countered by burying the hatchet temporarily to form a grand coalition, thus sharing the existing uncertainty with one’s opponents. Polarisation, decisiveness and ‘battle’ are exchanged for caution and middle-of-the-road instrumentalism. In our case we observed that the neo-corporatist system became fluid and developed towards a more pluralist policy subsystem for some time. ‘Poldering’ was exchanged for a call for action and a loss of resources from part of the network that became paralysed. In both situations, the change in policy subsystem configuration might recover over time.

While the theories discussed so far lay different stresses and sometimes lead to different expectations, there are also clear agreements, while the factors named in one theory do not commonly exclude the factors that another theory emphasises. So the question is whether the models compete, or whether each retains some sediment of the context in which the model came into existence. We incline towards the latter interpretation, which does not remove the fact that some models, developed in another context, are generally poor at explanation. In the present case study this was the case with the Advocacy Coalition Framework, which was not inspired by neo-corporatist systems. The policy generation model, though, chokes in precisely the same neo-corporatist context by not acknowledging that extreme external shocks – disasters – lead to a call for strong, decisive government and thus a break with the ‘poldering’, neo-corporatist policy process, which, by contrast, is something that is very adequately described by the Punctuated Equilibrium Model, in both pluralistic and neo-corporatist contexts. This, however, fails, to predict the various positive and negative impulses of a context-specific effect, meaning that it is well suited to description, but cannot be used to predict. Incidentally, it fails completely in relation to minor changes, for which it has little to say about mechanisms. The Elements of Governance Model does provide an insight into the context-specific effect of impulses. Both the status of different elements of governance as well as the initial changes wrought by impulses in one or more of these elements together form the context for further changes (or their encapsulation). All in all, in the present case study it seems that the Punctuated Equilibrium Model and the Elements of Governance Model are most fruitful for analysing the changes. After this conclusion we end with an observation on the policy subsystem configurations we have encountered.

Policy subsystem configurations

Differences in context are of course important insofar as they are relevant to policy change and the mechanisms by which they are realised. The discussion speedily ends up at the core of the various ways in which ‘governance’ can be given shape. The structure within which actors perform is important in this regard. This is frequently governed by institutions, which determine how many functional or geographic scales can be distinguished in the policy process, how the actors in a network interact horizontally, and how the interaction between the layers proceeds. Besides the structure, comparison between pluriform and neo-corporatist decision making soon clearly shows that opinions and values also play a part. In brief, policy subsystem configurations should be taken into account. A variety of typologies are available, an example being that of Lulofs & Hoppe (2003), who expand the ACF with a taxonomy of
policy subsystem configurations. The dimensions are the degree of strategic co-ordination between members of subsets of actors and the degree of shared policy beliefs among subsets of actors. Bressers (1995) and Bressers & O’Toole (1998) present a taxonomy according to the degree of interconnectedness and the degree of cohesion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of shared policy beliefs among subsets of actors (Lulofs and Hoppe 2003 2005 2006) and/or the degree of cohesion (Bressers 1993, Bressers and O’Toole 1998)</th>
<th>Degree of strategic co-ordination between members of subsets of actors (Lulofs and Hoppe 2003 2005 2006) and/or the degree of interconnectedness (Bressers 1995, Bressers and O’Toole 1998)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Mature Neo-Corporatist Coalition/Network (Neo-corporatist PSS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Resource dependency network</td>
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Table 1: Typology of policy subsystem configurations.

There is a connection here with the work of Howlett & Ramesh (1998; 2002), who also maintain a taxonomy of policy subsystems, which serves as a basis for their formation of theories of policy change. We appear to agree that at least four configurations of policy subsystems are relevant to policy change models: pluralist networks, neo-corporatist networks, resource dependency networks, and issue networks. This paper has analysed two firework explosions and observes that policy change and especially relevant policy change mechanisms also depend on policy subsystem configurations. We have illustrated this by analyzing differences between neo-corporatist and pluralist policy subsystems. This has supplied the building bricks for part of the puzzle, but other important parts still have to be found. A significant finding is also that in this case, policy change included a change in the characteristics of the policy subunit configuration.
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