Flight or fight, or tend and befriend? A comparative perspective on blame management of cabinet ministers

Abstract (238 words): In response to controversial events, ministers can influence their political fate by convincing the elite actors who actively determine their fate (media, parliamentary majorities, the Premier, fellow ministers, and top civil servants) that they are not to blame, or at least should not be punished. Ministers use blame management strategies to achieve this aim. The question remains whether accountability forums and other key actors in majoritarian and consensual systems prefer similar blame management from their ministers, or whether they prefer different blame management strategies. Ministers can either use strategies which confront or accommodate other elite actors. Following an institutional perspective, I expect that key actors in majoritarian systems prefer ministers to use confrontational strategies after blameworthy events, while elite actors in consensual systems prefer accommodative strategies. This paper presents a report of 62 qualitative vignette-interviews conducted in the Netherlands and the state of New South Wales, Australia. NSW interviewees generally preferred more confrontational strategies, such as counter attacks and scapegoating, while Dutch interviewees preferred more accommodative strategies, such as excuses and apologies. This paper finds that Hood et al’s (2016) conclusion that officeholders commonly respond in ‘a staged retreat’ manner does not translate to more consensual systems. In this cross-system comparison we have demonstrated that for BM too, ‘institutions matter’ (Olsen, 2013; 2015). The political environment seems to matter for how accountability forums and other key players expect ministers to behave when they become the focus of political scrutiny after controversial events.

Key words: political elites, ministers, blame management, political institutions, qualitative vignettes
A comparative perspective on blame management

The classic theory of ‘fight or flight’ (Cannon, 1932) argues that animals and humans are primed to respond to external threats by either fighting with or fleeing from the threat. More recently, Taylor et al (2000) demonstrated that females, both human and animal, do not respond by with fight or flight, but are rather primed to respond to external threats by a ‘tend and befriend’ response. According to the ‘tend and befriend’ response, humans respond to threats by protecting and calming offspring while blending into the environment (tending) and seeking out their social group for mutual defense (befriending).

Political executives also have response mechanisms to ward off stress and threats to their political survival. In most parliamentary democracies, ministers face an upward trend in the number of resignation calls and in the number of forced resignations (Dowding and Lewis, 2012; Bovens et al, 2015). Key players in these accountability processes, which may affect their political capital and career features, are both formal and informal accountability forums (parliamentarians and journalists) and other influential actors (the Premier, colleagues, top civil servants) (Althaus, 2008). Ministers try to influence their political survival by providing accounts and convincing those key players that they should not be held accountable or at least should not be sanctioned for controversial events occurring in their portfolios (Boin et al, 2009; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003). Since the seminal work of Weaver (1986), studies into blame management (BM) have described a whole range of strategies which ministers can use to convince these actors (Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2012; McGraw, 1991; Hansson, 2015). Broadly, blame management (BM) strategies can be divided into strategies that ministers use to confront these elite actors and strategies that ministers use to accommodate them. In other words, ministers’ strategies in blame games either fall in the ‘fight or flight’, meaning confrontational, strategies, or the ‘tend and befriend’, meaning accommodative, strategies.

Ministers can use both accommodative and confrontational BM. However, how ministers respond to threats to their survival is influenced by the political and social environment they find themselves in (Olsen, 2015). Comparative empirical research efforts in blame avoidance research are sparse (Hinterleitner, 2015; Brändström and Kuipers, 2003, cf). Most empirical studies on the use and efficacy of these BM strategies after negative events lack a systematic incorporation of ‘context’, in the form of issue-related or system-specific contextual factors (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2015; Hinterleitner, 2015; Brändström and Kuipers, 2003). In a cross-country comparative study, Hood and others (2016) concluded that, in all countries studied, officeholders commonly respond in ‘a staged retreat’ manner, in
which officeholders start confrontational and only retreat towards more accommodative strategies later in the blame game. However, their study wholly focuses on Westminster democracies\(^1\), as does the bulk of BM research. In Westminster democracies, a winner takes all form of politics prevails (Lijphart, 1999). In consensual democracies, power is generally is shared among multiple parties. Even though, as Hobolt and Karp (2010; 300) conclude, coalition governments are becoming more prevalent in all parliamentary democracies, there is precious little BM research on them (cf Brändström and Kuipers, 2003; Bovens et al, 1999). Therefore, the question is how blame games unfold in consensual environments, and whether BM strategies work in the same way as in Westminster systems.

In order to answer this question, I compare how elite actors in two political environments interpret how ministers do respond and should respond to blameworthy events. Specifically, I analyze 62 qualitative vignette-interviews with (former) ministers, parliamentarians, journalists and civil servants in the Netherlands and New South Wales. The Netherlands is a consociational parliamentary system, in which elite actors within and outside of Parliament interact on the basis of cooperation and ‘consider consultation more appropriate than antagonistic behaviour’ (Beyers et al, 2014; 10; te Velde, 2010; 206). New South Wales, the biggest state in the Australian federal democracy, is a Westminster-type parliamentary system, in which elite actors interact on the basis of conflict and where ‘competing viewpoints and perspectives are the lifeblood of the political process’ (Clune and Griffith, 2006; Turner and Hogan, 2006; 13).

If key actors in these two types of parliamentary systems have similar accounts of how ministers do and should respond to blameworthy events, it would give more credence to Hood and others’ claim that officeholders responses to blame follow common patterns of ‘reactivity, staged retreat and efficacy’ across different systems (2016).

This paper will proceed as follows. The next paragraph lines out the theoretical framework and shows how the strategies in each blame management stage score on the confrontational-accommodative axis. In addition, I will explain the central institutional thesis of this study. This is followed by an explanation of the design and methods used in this study. The result section will start with a first overview of how the Dutch and the NSW elite actors score on this confrontational-accommodative axis, i.e. whether they mention ministers who employ either fight-or-flight strategies or tend-and-befriend strategies (i.e. statements how ministers would react). The following empirical paragraphs provide a qualitative analysis of how the elite actors describe the strategies, conditioned

\(^1\) And one Presidential system (US: case of Clinton).
them and interpreted them in terms of consequences and appropriateness (i.e. statements how ministers should react). Furthermore I will provide a conclusion and discussion of the findings. I end with a short reflection on the performative aspects of blame management.

**Blame management strategies – a staged retreat**

Blame avoidance research within public administration mostly starts from the assumption that political actors have an inherent aversion to loss, whether it is in terms of policy or in terms of office, and that to avoid these losses, actors engage in pre-emptive blame avoidance or reactive blame management strategies (Weaver, 1986; Pierson, 1994). According to Hood and others (2015) blame is conventionally defined as a combination of perceived avoidable harm or loss and perceived responsibility at any given point in time (cf, Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood; 2005; Hood, 2011).

This study focuses on periods when a negative event has occurred and a blame game has started; when political executives have to rely on reactive (discursive) blame management strategies. When an event is framed as a ‘blameworthy’, it often sparks blame games. Blame games can be described as framing contests in which political executives and other (elite) actors try to shape and construct public interpretations (Edelman, 1977; 1988; De Vries, 2004). According to Brändström and Kuipers (2003) these framing contests often move through three stages: severity of the event, the responsibility for the event, and the political consequences for the incident.

In each stage, the political executive has a strategic decision to make. In the first stage, the executive has to decide whether to deny or admit the event caused harm. In the second stage, the executive has to decide whether to deny or admit responsibility for the event and in the last stage whether to admit both and how to mitigate the consequences of this admission (Brändström and Kuipers, 2003). Hood and others (2009) called the three strategic decisions: problem denial (PD), responsibility denial (RD) and problem and responsibility admission (PA + RA). In each stage, the political executive has to decide between a confrontational (defensive) and an accommodative stance, as each decision focus on denial versus admission. Therefore, the process is also called a ‘staged retreat’, as the minister gradually accepts more blame for the occurrence and responsibility for the outcomes of the event (Hood, 2009; Schütz, 1998; 121). A stylized presentation can be seen in Figure 5.1.
Figure 5.1: Blame game stages and ‘staged retreat’ decisions (adopted from Hood et, 2009; Brändström and Kuipers, 2003)

Many authors provided typologies for strategies political executives can employ to support their decision (Hood, 2011; Weaver, 1986; McGraw, 1990; 1991; Boin et al, 2009; Bovens et al, 1999). Not only the decision could be more confrontational or accommodative, also the strategies used to support a decision could be more accommodative or confrontational. Lijpharts (1968) ideal types of elite behaviour can be used to distinguish confrontational strategies from accommodative ones. Strategies can thus be classified as accommodative when ministers accommodate to opponents’ perceptions of the event, focus on established procedures and try to depoliticize the issue. On the other hand, strategies can be classified as confrontational when ministers ignore or confront opponents’ perceptions of the event, focus on specific outcomes, try to politicize the issue, and shift responsibility to specific other actors.

Table 5.1 shows the division of specific blame management strategies in each stage along a confrontational-accommodative axis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies to support:</th>
<th>Strongly confrontational strategies</th>
<th>Moderately confrontational strategies</th>
<th>Moderately accommodative strategies</th>
<th>Strongly accommodative strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem denial (but responsibility admission possible)</td>
<td>Pure denial (ignoring stonewalling) Denial and counterattack</td>
<td>Limit the agenda; Justifications: reframing of consequences and reframing of procedures (McGraw, 1991)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem admission but responsibility denial</td>
<td>Vertical diffusion of responsibility (Scapegoating)</td>
<td>Horizontal diffusion of responsibility (network actors, collective responsibility)</td>
<td>Excuses (plea of ignorance, mistakes are made)</td>
<td>Depoliticization: announcing an Independent investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem admission and responsibility admission</td>
<td>Harm compensated (good money after bad) Institutional action-taking, i.e. agency and policy</td>
<td>Acknowledgement of responsibility: apologies Acknowledging personal culpability (possible resignation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.1: division of strategies into confrontational and accommodative responses

The strategies (some call them accounts or responses) range from a confrontational stance, such as counter attacks and denial, to an accommodative stance, such as apologizing or resigning (Resodihardjo et al, 2015). According to Coombs (2007; 143) executives need to change tactics over time because as ‘the reputational threat increases, crisis teams should use more accommodative strategies’. Multiple studies show however, that this order of retreat does not always take place (Hearit, 2006; Hood et al, 2009). Indeed, Brandström and Kuipers concluded in their case study of politicized incidents that ‘it is possible or even likely that actors switch and go back and forth within their positions, depending on the postures taken by others and the general ‘public mood’ about the issue’ (2003; 304).

An institutional perspective on blame management

According to Edelman, the persuasiveness of these reactive blame management strategies for each stage depends on the conventions and perceptions held by participants in the political world (Edelman, 1988; 96; Haider-Markel and Josly, 2001; 522). According to Haider-Markel en Josly (2001), a given frame can only be persuasive when it is line with the ‘predispositions of those receiving the message’ (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; 522). Blame avoidance strategies of ministers should be in line with the interpretations of other key players in the blame game. Olsen explained in his article about political accountability that, in settled political systems ‘repertoires of socially constructed and validated accounts and responses to accounts exist, influenced by what is intelligible, expected and anticipated, appropriate and legitimate in specific political-cultural contexts’ Olsen, 2015; 459; cf. March and Olsen, 1995; Thompson 1987). Translated to this study, I expect that the political-cultural environment in which the minister, accountability forums and other key players do their work, affects how those key players interpret ministers’ blame management strategies.

If we follow Olsen’ thesis that key players are influenced by the existing political culture and institutions during accountability discussions, it is important to assess whether we can see these processes in blame management. Therefore, we need to assess whether elite actors’ interpretations are similar in two opposite political elite environments.

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2 In this paper, I focus on blame management strategies, as defined in most blame literature as ‘public’ accounts or actions (McGraw, 1991; Hood et al, 2009). Although ministers could also try to manage blame by talking to elite actors behind the scenes, this paper focuses on the public blame game and therefore on how strategies are used and explained on the public stage by the elite actors.
As explained, the Netherlands is a powerful example of a consociational parliamentary system (Lijphart, 1968; 211). The Netherlands features mostly broad multi-party coalitions, a strong working parliament with ample (policy) influence for the opposition (Andeweg, 2012), and proportional representation (Lijphart, 1990). Consociational systems are characterized by fragmented, but stable systems in which numerous political parties represent societal subgroups in Parliament. Within and outside Parliament the party elites have to cooperate across party boundaries, due to the pressures of coalition cooperation (Beyers et al, 2014; 9). Although the Netherlands has recently experienced more adversarial politics in the electoral arena (Andeweg, 2008; Pennings and Keman, 2008), important consociational practices are still in place (Hendriks and Bovens, 2008; 201; Kickert, 2003). Long-standing consensual practices are still in place, which could ‘reflect a political culture in which consultation has been considered more appropriate than antagonistic political behavior’ (Beyers et al, 2014; 10). Therefore, I hypothesize that Dutch elite actors will expect and will prefer ministers who use more accommodative strategies in response to blameworthy events as opposed to confrontational strategies.

Expectation 1: Dutch elite actors will expect and prefer ministers to admit problems caused by the event and employ more accommodative strategies

Conversely, Australia (and New South Wales) is a clear majoritarian system in the Westminster tradition. New South Wales has one-party majority cabinets (Lijphart counts the Liberals and Nationals as one, 1999), executive dominance, a two-party system and disproportional electoral system and a pluralist interest group system (Lijphart, 1999). Majoritarian systems are characterized by centralized systems in which one party usually rules and the prime minister of this party exerts considerable influence. Within and outside parliament, there is much less need for cooperation between political adversaries, which makes political practices more antagonistic. Since the 1890s, the New South Wales Parliament is known as the ‘Bear Pit’, due to the ‘confrontational style of debate’ (Hesford, 2007; 137). Furthermore, Australia has a ‘liberal, competitive and partially tabloid-driven’ media climate, exacerbating the adversarial political environment (Schillemans, 2016; Tiffen, 2006). Therefore, I expect NSW elite actors to prefer ministers who use more confrontational strategies in response to blameworthy events as opposed to accommodative strategies.

Expectation 2: NSW elite actors will mostly expect and prefer ministers to first deny the problems caused by the event and employ more confrontational strategies
A comparative design with qualitative vignette interviews

In order to gauge whether and why key players have different interpretation of blame management, a qualitative individual level design is appropriate. Within comparative research, interviews are useful to identify how institutional key players formulate and argue their positions on practical issues (Miller, 1997). According to Aberman and Rockman (2002; 673) ‘elite interviewing, is often important if one needs to know what a set of people think, or how they interpret an event or series of events’. In this study, I conducted 62 open-ended, semi-structured elite interviews, to assess which blame management strategies elite actors both expect and prefer from ministers. In the Netherlands, I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews between July and December 2014. In New South Wales, I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews between September and December 2015.

Interviewees were evenly distributed between the two systems and across four types of political elite actors: ex-ministers, top civil servants, parliamentarians and journalists with relevant personal experience, along with variation on key characteristics of each subgroup. I used purposeful stratified sampling, starting with identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals’ in each of the four groups ‘that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest’ (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011). Table 5.2 shows the variation of interviewees over the different groups and within each group. The way the interviewees are selected limits the possibility of full representativeness and empirical generalization of the study, but it fulfils the aims of the research: an exploration of how elite actors perceive ministerial blame management.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Dutch interviews</th>
<th>Backgrounds represented within groups:</th>
<th>Australian interviews</th>
<th>Backgrounds represented within groups:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Daily newspapers (5x), weekly political outlet (3x), TV (1x)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Daily newspapers (2x), Radio (2x), political historian/journalist (1x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentarians</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Party affiliations: Labor, Social liberals, Conservative liberals, Socialists (2x), Christian parties (3x)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(no ministerial background): Labor (2x), Liberals (3x),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former ministers (some junior)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Portfolio: Justice, Social affairs, Defense, Home affairs, Environment, Education</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Portfolio/position: Attorney General, Deputy Premier with multiple backgrounds (3x), Premier, Health (2x), Party affiliation: Nationals (2x), Labor (5x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top civil servants +</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Departmental background: Justice (5), Education, Economic Affairs, Environment</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Departmental background: Justice (2x), Health (2x), Family Services, Education Political staff (1x Liberal ministers + 1x Nationals, 4x Labor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>political staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total interviews:</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2: Background of interviewees
In the interviews, I combined open-ended questions with qualitative vignettes. According to Bloor and Wood (2006; 183), qualitative vignettes can be described as: *A technique used in structured and depth interviews as well as focus groups, providing sketches of fictional (or fictionalized) scenarios*. ‘Vignettes thus collect situated data on group values, group beliefs and group norms of behaviour’ (idem, 2006; 183).

Qualitative vignettes are useful in this research, because their can be used to examine the interpretation of comparable situations by different groups of interviewees (Barter and Renold, 1999). The combination of vignettes and open-ended questions ensured a balance between response validity (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; 674) and comparability (Jenkins et al, 2010). Furthermore, blame games are also sensitive topics, often involving adverse behavior by one or multiple elite actors, harm to social groups and violation of norms. Hypotheticals can help to create a safe setting for interviewees to give genuine responses, without endangering their current position (Wilks, 2004; 82; Jenkins et al, 2010; 181).

In this research I used three different three-staged vignettes, in order to ask about ‘common’ blameworthy events. Staged vignettes were used in this case, in order to ask interviewees on their interpretations of the three stages identified in ‘blame games’\(^\text{iv}\): the description of the blameworthy event (severity decision), description of the reactive blame management of the minister (responsibility decision) and the description of the consequences (consequences decision). Following the practice of Jenkins and others (2010), interviewees were asked to describe two critical incidents (relating to responsibility and resignation) they experienced and their general views on ministerial responsibility in incidents. After a short explanation, interviewees were asked to reflect on two or three qualitative vignettes\(^\text{v}\). After each stage of each vignette, the interviewees were invited to explain what they imagined the (described) minister would do in this stage and what they thought the minister should do.

Table 5.3 summarizes the set-up of the vignettes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of vignette</th>
<th>Vignette 1</th>
<th>Vignette 2</th>
<th>Vignette 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blameworthy events</td>
<td>2 personal scandals: 1 trip from third party, 1 gift from third party</td>
<td>Incident in prison due to departmental errors</td>
<td>Program failure, death and fraud(^\text{v})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{\text{i}}\) The Australian vignette was originally the home insulation story, but it was too familiar and therefore caused too much ‘contamination by information’ (*Fischhoff 1975; Fischhoff and Beyth 1975*) NSW respondent. Therefore, I decided to revise the vignette slightly, keeping the type of resignation issue, blame management, context and outcome similar.
Qualitative vignettes need to adhere to three quality criteria. First, I tried to ensure the plausibility of the vignettes (Barter and Renold, 1999; 2000) by basing them on five historical blame games (3 Dutch and 2 NSW examples) and by asking the interviewees to reflect on the plausibility of the vignettes (Jenkins et al, 2010; 188). Second, I asked interviewees to fill in missing context, provide possible strategies by the minister and other actors, and conditions and outcomes of certain strategies (West, 1982). Third, I pre-tested the interviews on comprehensibility, ambiguity and plausibility by two public administration scholars, three PhD’s and three persons ‘in the field’.

Certainly, qualitative vignettes have considerable disadvantages: vignettes are by definition short and ‘selectively simulate elements of the research topics’, focus only on certain blame games, can be coloured by current events in the political sphere or social desirability, and, most importantly, vignettes focus on perceptions and do not have to reflect actual behavior of the interviewees in similar situations. (Hughes et al, 2002; 286; O’Dell et al, 2012). I have tried to overcome these disadvantages by letting interviewees expand the vignettes themselves in terms of behavior of the actors and context, leaving room for open questions after the interview and providing only brief explanation of the goal of the interviews. Last, the study focuses on interpretations, on ‘understanding the complexities of the role (of minister) as seen by the key protagonists’ in blame games (Stansfield, 2014; 18).

All interviews were tape-recorded, written into verbatim transcripts and coded using Nvivo software. In this research, I follow a staged approach to comparative data analysis similar to Bird and others (2012; 341). First, I familiarized myself with the data in the form of open coding. I used axial codes, in the sense of conceptualizing codes to distinguish between different strategies, and created

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical example</th>
<th>Blameworthy event: type of resignation issue (stage 1)</th>
<th>Reactive blame management (stage 2)</th>
<th>Context (stage 3)</th>
<th>Consequences (stage 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 NL historical example (Jorritsma) and 1 NSW (Barry O’Farrell)</td>
<td>Extra political: possible personal scandal (favouring third party?)</td>
<td>1: Problem denial 2: Problem denial: plea of ignorance</td>
<td>1 minister ‘stronger’ in terms of background</td>
<td>1 stays in office, 1 resignation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Dutch historical example (Teeven)</td>
<td>Political: departmental error and possible personal error of minister (budget cuts/prison policy)</td>
<td>1: Responsibility denial: agency strategy + policy strategy + refuse independent inquiry</td>
<td>Close to elections + comparable incidents</td>
<td>1 resignation after multiple incidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NL: Aus. historical example (Home insulation program) AUS: Dutch historical example (Fyra)</td>
<td>Political: departmental error with possible personal error of minister within a network of other actors</td>
<td>1: responsibility denial: agency strategy + independent investigation</td>
<td>Independent inquiry negative findings + involvement Premier + deaths (media salience)</td>
<td>No resignation: in AUS: reshuffle later, in NL: give up portfolio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3: Set-up of the vignettes (see appendix for vignette stories)
hierarchy in codes (grouping of strategies in stages and accommodative-confrontational divide). Second, I recoded the data using the existing coding tree (still minor changes possible) to focus on responses to the qualitative vignettes (selective coding). Third, I created matrices according to key themes: the identified strategies, the conditions interviewees identified for these strategies and assessment of effectiveness and appropriateness. In this stage, I explicitly compared to what extent Dutch and NSW interviewees had different interpretations of these elements. Finally, I will ask the interviewees to comment on the extent to which the results were recognizable and agreed upon (Lilleker, 2003).

**Confrontational and accommodative blame management: a first overview**

A short overview can serve as a first broad brush stroke to assess how many interviewees expected ministers to use accommodative or confrontational strategies in each stage. According to Silverman (1985) and Bryman (2012) qualitative data analyses often suffer from the tendency towards ‘anecdotalism’. Therefore, they suggest limited quantifications of the codes in order to uncover how broadly some statements are shared among the interviewees in the study (Bryman, 2012; 625).

Table 5.4 shows how many Dutch and NSW interviewees expected ministers to use particular strategies in to the hypothetical events.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies to support:</th>
<th>Strongly confrontational strategies</th>
<th>Moderately confrontational strategies</th>
<th>Moderately accommodative strategies</th>
<th>Strongly accommodative strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem denial</td>
<td>Problem denial</td>
<td>Limit the agenda</td>
<td>NSW: n/a</td>
<td>NL: n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NSW: 18 interviewees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NL: 9 interviewees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD + counter attack</td>
<td>NSW: 10</td>
<td>Justifications</td>
<td>NSW: 21</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NL: 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem admission but responsibility denial</td>
<td>Scapegoating</td>
<td>Collective responsibility</td>
<td>NSW: 10</td>
<td>NSW: 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NSW: 25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NL: 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem admission and responsibility admission</td>
<td>Will compensate harm</td>
<td></td>
<td>NSW: 9</td>
<td>NSW: 12</td>
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Table 5.4: quantitative overview of references to each strategy by NSW and Dutch actors

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11
A quick glance at the table shows that in general Dutch interviewees expected ministers to employ accommodative strategies more often, while NSW interviewees expected ministers to employ confrontational strategies more often.

In terms of confrontational strategies, problem denial and scapegoating (of bureaucrats) were mentioned by 18 and 25 NSW interviewees, while they were mentioned by only 9 and 10 Dutch interviewees. For the moderately confrontational strategies, such as justifications, this picture is less clear. Horizontal diffusion of responsibility (collective responsibility) was even mentioned more by Dutch interviewees (20 over 10).

In terms of accommodative strategies, excuses and apologies were mentioned by 20 and 18 Dutch interviewees, while both were mentioned by 12 NSW interviewees. In fact, Dutch interviewees trump NSW interviewees in references to all strongly accommodative strategies in which ministers admit both the harm and responsibility (apologies, institutional action-taking and resignation). This is less clear for the strategy of announcing of independent inquiries, which was mentioned by an overwhelming number of interviewees in both systems (NSW: 24 and Dutch: 29). Slightly more NSW interviewees mentioned ministers compensating harm after admitting responsibility (9 over 7).

In this type of study, we must be careful not to confuse ‘frequency with meaning’ in these limited quantitative exercises (Beuving and de Vries, 2015; 169). Quantifying interviewees’ interpretations can gloss over considerable differences within the categories. Besides, Beuving and de Vries argue that ‘sometimes the rarity or absence of a particular word/theme in your material is more telling than the abundance of these words’ (2015; 170).

Therefore, a more qualitative discussion of the interviews is in order. In vignette-interviews, interviewees were asked to envision what the minister would do after a situation. In their response, interviewees expected certain strategies more than others, but they also expanded under which conditions ministers would use these strategies. The following three paragraphs will discuss if Dutch and NSW interviewees generally expected ministers to be confrontational or accommodative. In each stage, interviewees also assessed the effect and appropriateness of these strategies (when they focused on what should the minister do). Interviewees often added a positive, neutral or negative interpretation to the strategy, by either relating the strategy to certain outcomes in blame levels or to norms and ideas of appropriateness. In each stage, I will explain whether interviewees expected minister to use particular accommodative or confrontational strategies, under which conditions they envisioned ministers doing so and how they assessed the effect and appropriateness of these strategies.
Severity of the incident: acknowledge or minimize?

Eighteen NSW interviewees expected ministers to focus on problem denial, while only nine Dutch interviewees expected problem denial. In New South Wales, ministers pursue problem denial both passively, by ignoring and stonewalling the event, and actively, by claiming no core values are threatened. In a more confrontational vein, NSW ministers can also decide on problem denial in the policy failure vignette, by launching a counterattack on the Opposition. One minister explains the strategy as ‘countering the narrative of opponents’ without directly denying the problems caused (cf. Boin et al, 2009; Tarrow, 1994).

If someone asked a difficult question you didn't know the answer to... You would say: I will, it is typical of the Opposition, comes into this House, every day, fear-mongering about public transport, they hate public transport. You know they don't want people to take public transport... Then you never mislead, the particular might be very true, but I never misled the House. You play the political game (NSW minister 5)

None of the Dutch interviewees expected ministers to launch a counter attack on any of the key players. Dutch interviewees mentioned problem denial only in general terms and never expected a direct attack on the opposition parties in Parliament. Both Dutch and NSW ministers are expected to employ, the less confrontational, justifications. In justifications, ministers admit being responsible for the problems caused by the event, but claim that the harm was less severe than seemed. For example, as response for the integrity vignette, nine interviewees expected both Dutch and NSW ministers to argue that the integrity incident caused little harm as no official ties were found between the minister’s portfolio and the company that brought them on the trip. With regard to the policy-related events, NSW ministers use justifications in the form of positive stories about the policy or about oneself.

I mean sometimes fears ought to be down played and I would say 'Look, the economy isn't tangent, we've got a reasonable economy, the baseline is fine, there's things that will keep on going up and down but our economy is the sound point', but then you treat people seriously by giving them, by listening to what they say and responding to them (NSW minister 2)

Dutch interviewees expected similar strategies of the minister, but in their answers, justifications were mixed with institutional-action taking.
What can you do about it immediately? I mean, I would make a good plan and show what has been done at the moment. Often in judgments of the policy there is little attention for what has been at the moment. People are often not informed, so the minister would have the art of information the political actors what has been done, because then these actors immediately have a better picture of the situation (Dutch minister 6)

**When does denial ‘work?’** In NSW, the strength of the minister and how journalists frame the severity of the event affects ministers’ decision to take a confrontational stance, i.e. problem denial. In passive problem denial, NSW interviewees focused on the strength of the minister, in terms of reputation in the media.

Okay. So, if you're a minister who is really competent, on top of the game, generally you can ignore, and the Premier does. The Premier does not appear and go on the radio programs or he doesn’t pander to them, but they call him Teflon Mike, because he is seen to be, you know, untouchable..

He's doing a bloody good job, comparatively speaking. However, a number of his ministers are not above reproach, they have to fight for their position and if they aren't seen as competent in the eyes of the press, who form public opinion.. So they have to almost pander to these forces. So they go on the radio programs, make counter claims, and so they become quite, well, who is pulling whose tree, that becomes the question (NSW civil servant 4)

Whether ministers launch counter attacks, depends on the strength of the Opposition to go against these counter attacks, both in the ‘numbers’ in Parliament and the parliamentarians’ debating skills.

Dutch ministers are much likely to move towards accommodative strategies, especially in integrity incidents. They are often not able to deny the harm caused by the event, because they are constrained by the positions taken by the moderate Opposition parties and authoritative journalists and commentators.

Sometimes the debate can zoom in and on a certain moment, you see that the minister does not take parliament seriously [when denying the problem] and then the tone can shift... If parliament feels offended, even the more traditional parties would consider this a reason to draw a line: this is not appropriate. (Dutch parliamentarian 1)
Similar processes influence whether Dutch and NSW ministers can use justifications, in the form of claims that the harm is less severe than imagined or positive stories. Dutch actors focus on the stance of the coalition parties and moderate Opposition in Parliament, while NSW actors focus on the position of the media in terms of the severity of the incident. In NSW, the Opposition always tries to underscore the severity of the incident and that the outcomes of the justifications depend upon whether the media reports mostly the Opposition stance or the government stance. As described in 5.6.1, interviewees expected ministers to pair justifications with other strategies, and therefore interviewees often conditioned and interpreted the ‘story’, as in narrative with multiple strategies, in its entirety.

**Is problem denial effective and appropriate?** In the problem denial stage, Dutch and NSW interviewees varied considerably in their interpretation of the strategies. Interestingly, the NSW interviewees who expected confrontational strategies, such as problem denial and counter attack, equally assessed the strategies positively and negatively. On the one hand, problem denial blocks negative news, restores public confidence, while it other interviewees argued that problem denial is ineffective or part of a ‘cover-up’. For example, a NSW journalist explains how journalists can counter a stonewalling minister, by ‘doing a Paxman’.

> If they end with not talking all at, which has been the case in the past, it all depends on how they decide to play it. Usually with these things, they have a line: here: no further comment. So we had situations where, there was one particular minister who had already put up a brick wall... In these situation there is only one question: did you do it and when? If they keep using that line (no further comment) and if they keep prevailing it becomes apparent, so I can’t remember what the issue was. The journalists decided to ask him a question over and over again and it went on for 10 minutes to expose the absurdity (journalist 4)

NSW and Dutch interviewees assessed justifications of minister either neutrally or positively. However, as explained, interviewees often paired justifications with other strategies and focused less on justifications as independent strategies in their stories.

Table 5.5 shows the interpretations of the interviewees of the strategies in the problem denial stage.

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4 This paper focuses on the differences between interviewees’ perceptions in the two systems. A future paper will analyze to what extent the interviewees ‘role’ affected their perception of blame management strategies. In other words, whether ministers, parliamentarians, journalists and civil servants differ in perceptions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Conditional upon:</th>
<th>Interpretation positively/neutral /negatively</th>
<th>Examples of interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem denial</strong></td>
<td>NSW: 18</td>
<td>‘Teflon’ ministers, reputation in media,</td>
<td>Equal divide (5/6/7)</td>
<td>Blocking negative news, restore public confidence, but also minister locked-in, dodging responsibility, spin, cover-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>strength of Opposition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch: 9</td>
<td>Strategy only mentioned in general terms, focus</td>
<td>Negatively and neutral (4/4)</td>
<td>Lying, dodging responsibility, against parliamentary standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>on position of Parliament</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem denial and counter attack</strong></td>
<td>NSW: 10</td>
<td>Strength of Opposition, strength minister</td>
<td>Equal divide (4/2/4)</td>
<td>Credibility opponent lost and incident gone but also lying, not addressing the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch: 0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Justifications</strong></td>
<td>NSW: 21</td>
<td>Pair with positive stories, position of media</td>
<td>Positive or neutral (9/10)</td>
<td>Show fixes, restoring public confidence, highlighting positive stories (strategy often paired with other strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch: 17</td>
<td>Pair with institutional action-taking, position</td>
<td>Neutral, some positive (10/7)</td>
<td>Put incident in context, procedural fairness, procedures followed (strategy often paired with other strategies), cliché</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>of parliament</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.5: Assessment of strategies in the problem denial stage

In sum, NSW ministers are deemed much more likely to start with problem denial, while Dutch ministers are much more likely to decide to accommodate, or at least not openly oppose, key players in the problem denial stage. Dutch ministers probably pursue less problem denial strategies. Interviewees tended to agree that this was due to how the other key players, journalists (NSW) and parliamentarians (Dutch), in the blame game framed the severity of the event. Interviewees gave more importance to those blame game processes than to more personal characteristics of the minister. In this stage, political environment therefore could affect the blame management decision of the minister.

**Responsibility for the incident: to deny or not to deny?**

When denying responsibility, NSW ministers are often expected to actively employ confrontational, scapegoating, practices. NSW interviewees not only reflected more often on scapegoating, they also expected ministers to use stronger scapegoating practices, such as the ritual sacking of a bureaucrat. Dutch ministers are expected to argue they were not properly informed by their civil service\(^5\) or to

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\(^5\) Dutch parliamentarian 8
explain in Parliament that they had tough internal meetings with involved civil servants. NSW ministers however, are expected to ‘invite’ the head of a department to resign, to use DGs as ‘fall guys’ after letting the DG front the media, and even to ‘ceremonially execute’ or ‘ritually sack’ heads of departments. Also as response to integrity incidents, NSW interviewees described ministers who blame political staff for forgetting to ‘fill out paperwork’.

If I were the minister, I’d be demanding a public explanation from the Chief Executive or the Director General or whoever it is. I’d be saying that I wanted a report on my desk by the end of the week and that I want to know how they’re going to ameliorate this from happening again in the future. If it does happen again in the future, I would say, “Well, did you follow those actions that you promised me that you were going to follow? If not, why not? A full explanation.” And if there has to be a fall guy, it’s the Director General. Start again (NSW minister 6)

In contrast, Dutch ministers are more expected to diffuse responsibility instead of actively denying it. Ministers can claim responsibility for the event is collectively shared instead of an individual attribution (horizontal diffusion of responsibility). Twenty Dutch interviewees and ten NSW interviewees expected ministers to argue responsibility is collectively shared. Ministers place collective responsibility on a chain of previous ministers, who left policy legacies behind, on networks of private actors, and on agencies at arm’s length of the minister.

We explained as committee: these are the facts, this went wrong there and ministerial responsibility was present. However, it was not possible to link this responsibility to one minister, but to the history of the policy which created the problem. A string of successive ministers replicated previous policy, which creates a collective responsibility. Therefore, the current minister is not responsible, but he has to take measures to address the problem (Dutch parliamentarian 2)

More accommodative strategies, such as excuses were generally less expected by NSW interviewees. Dutch interviewees however often identified ministers who use excuses in the form of pleas of ignorance

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6 Former Dutch minister 7
7 NSW minister 6
8 NSW minister 1 and NSW minister 5
during integrity related incidents (cf. Hansen, 2015). Dutch ministers can acknowledge the integrity violation which takes place when ministers for example receive gifts or trips from private companies, but they can plea that they didn’t knew the value or importance of the gifts or that they forgot them. They claim not to be responsible due to a lack of intent.

You are formally responsible. However, for me such responsibility reaches too far, because it is about integrity and then you need to have made a conscious decision in terms of integrity. It means you must have wanted the gift. And if you received something of which you can’t remember or you don’t know its value, then it doesn’t violate your integrity (Dutch minister 1)

Installing an independent inquiry trumped all other strategies regarding the number of interviewees expecting a specific strategy. In this strategy, ministers do not actively deny responsibility, but try to accommodate other actors, by asking a, more or less, independent authority to investigate who was responsible and what should be done (de Vries, 2006; Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006). Installing independent inquiries were particularly mentioned during policy and programmatic blameworthy events.

When to deny responsibility? Whether and how Dutch and NSW interviewees expected ministers to deny responsibility depended largely on the position and reputation of the involved minister. In terms of scapegoating, Dutch ministers with a strong position resist scapegoating and ‘stand in front’ of their civil service, even when parliamentarians explicitly criticize. In contrast, NSW ministers are expected by the media and the public to take ‘tough action’ after blameworthy events and to be ‘part of the answer and not part of the problem’. ⁹

One response might be actually to make them (bureaucrats) accountable: i.e. sack them. And so, the media get the blood they want and the people see that some though action has happened. And that has happened quite a lot in NSW politics, that a minister will actually make a bureaucrat the scapegoat. As a minister you cannot, be truly accountable for everything that happens in your department. (NSW former minister 1)

However, NSW interviewees explained only ministers with limited prior policy incidents can employ scapegoating credibly. Prior multiple incidents frame an event as part of a systemic problem and

⁹ Minister 5
therefore outside the responsibility of bureaucrats. Dutch minister need to address similar concerns when claiming collective responsibility for the event. According to Dutch interviewees, ministers have to pair diffusion with ‘appropriate procedural measures’. The ministers can then argue that despite not being responsible for the problem occurring, they still addresses it. To make a credible argument, ministers need good policy skills in Parliament.

In terms of excuses, most Dutch interviewees expected ministers to use excuses, especially pleas of ignorance, after integrity incidents. However pleas of ignorance can only be used by ministers with a ‘clean sheet’.

> Well, if someone has a good reputation and he makes such a mistake and he declares: ‘Oh yes, I am sorry, I drank the bottle of wine in the office and I did not realise the value’. He will apologize publicly, then you can continue. But if someone has multiple problems, has received a motion of no confidence a couple of times and his reputation is weak, then he is in trouble (Dutch top civil servant 7).

NSW interviewees mostly excluded ministers from using excuses after integrity incidents. They explained that with the history of NSW integrity scandals, claiming ignorance is not a credible strategy in Parliament and in the media.

Dutch and NSW interviewees explained a remarkably similar process for the installation of independent inquiries. According to almost all interviewees (40), ministers install independent inquiries themselves, to avoid they are pressured into one or seen as forced to announce one by their opponents in the media or Parliament.

> If it is likely that you will be forced to have an inquiry anyway, announce it yourself, before anyone else calls for it. If you announce it late, it doesn’t give you a lot of credibility. So, if it is likely that these things are going to run its course and you think it is likely that an inquiry, you know, there is an old saying in New South Wales, and Australia actually: don’t ever set up an inquiry if you don’t know the answer (NSW former ministerial staffer 3)

**Is responsibility denial effective and appropriate?** Dutch interviewees assessed ministers who actively denied responsibility by either scapegoating or collective responsibility negatively or were divided on its appropriateness. Scapegoating practices of the civil service were sometimes even described as a ‘deadly sin’. Contrary to expectation, NSW interviewees did not always approve of
ministers who used scapegoating strategies. They either assessed these ministers as taking tough action, and being a ‘champion’.

Sometimes you can become critical of your own department, because what the people want to hear is a champion, who is addressing their issues and who still cops criticism from commentators and the media, but from the channel 9, the guy who catches the train at Sydney, he wants to hear: this is not good enough, this is going to be fixed. Well, at last. someone who is going to do something about it. You always have to create some credibility with that, because if it is not fixed than you have a problem. One of the tactics is to sack someone (minister 5)

However, nine other interviewees argued that scapegoating showed that ministers admitted considerable problems and installed fear in their department.

I have been in really horrible attacks where I have actually said to the minister 'Do you want me to resign?' and he said 'You would have to be joking', he said 'in effect, that will just increase the pressure on me and then the department will become totally immobilised'. Then some of them will say to you quite frankly 'My advisor suggest to me that you already do that (civil servant 2)

NSW interviewees were neutral or negative about ministers who used moderately accommodative strategy, such as providing excuses. The State of New South Wales has an extensive history of integrity scandals. This, along with a powerful anti-corruption body (ICAC), caused many interviewees to interpret excuses as incredible strategies after integrity-related events. Dutch interviewees interpreted excuses in more neutral terms. However, most explained that ministers should be careful to use excuses, as the strategy lies close to misinforming parliament, which is considered by some as another ‘deadly sin’. The Dutch interviewees who interpreted the strategy negatively explained that when ministers claim they were not informed about an incident and they didn’t knew, it shows they are not on top of their portfolio.

Dutch and NSW interviewees assessed the accommodative strategy of announcing an independent investigation overtly effective and appropriate. Ministers can ‘shelve’ the incident, follow appropriate rituals, maintain control over the incident and show willingness to learn. In both systems, most interviewees assessed independent inquiries as a ‘classical’ reaction for ministers after policy failures. Independent strategies are apparently so ingrained in both political systems, that they are
‘normal procedures’ for ministers instead of an actual strategy. An example of the similar ‘shelving’ function of independent inquiries:

*During a highly political sensitive incident, a firm investigation is always appropriate and especially an independent one, because if you fail install this... A hint of suspicion will stick to the incident: there could be more [...] While if you install a firm independent investigation and more things will be discovered, you can handle that yourself because it is you who discovered it (Dutch top civil servant 2)*

Table 5.6 shows the interpretations of the interviewees of the responsibility denial strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Conditional upon:</th>
<th>Interpretation Positively /neutral /negatively</th>
<th>Examples of interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scapegoating</td>
<td>NSW: 25</td>
<td>Position media: minister as part of the answer, strength of minister, issue can be framed as operational mistake</td>
<td>Equal divide (9/7/9)</td>
<td>Show tough action, show minister as part of answer, but also problem admission, install fear in public service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch: 10</td>
<td>Strength minister (weak), performance in parliament</td>
<td>Negatively (7)</td>
<td>Strategy of weak minister, alienating public service, lying, ‘deadly sin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective responsibility</td>
<td>NSW: 10</td>
<td>Only mentioned in general terms</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch: 20</td>
<td>Fractured policy field, Need to be paired with ‘appropriate procedural measures’, minister strong policy reputation</td>
<td>Equal divide (7/4/9)</td>
<td>Often mentioned, but focus on the procedural measures taken, otherwise weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuses (i.e. plea of ignorance)</td>
<td>NSW: 12</td>
<td>Combination with other strategy, not for integrity scandals</td>
<td>Neutral or negative (8/4)</td>
<td>Underestimate the situation, not credible (integrity scandals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch: 20</td>
<td>During integrity scandals, reputation of ‘clean sheet’ minister</td>
<td>Neutral or negative (11/9)</td>
<td>Misinforming parliament, underestimate situation, portray as ‘not on top of portfolio’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcing independent inquiries</td>
<td>NSW: 24</td>
<td>Anticipated pressure to announce inquiry expected in media, political sensitive incident, ‘sensible’ minister</td>
<td>Positive or neutral (18/6)</td>
<td>‘Shelves’ incident, create distance between minister and incident, part of ritual response, control over inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch: 29</td>
<td>Anticipated pressure to announce inquiry expected in parliament, political sensitive incident</td>
<td>Positive or neutral (20/5)</td>
<td>Classical approach, show willingness to learn from incident, part of ritual response, control over inquiry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5.6: Assessment of strategies in the responsibility denial stage*
To summarize, NSW interviewees mentioned more ‘extreme’ strategies of responsibility denial. However, NSW interviewees were also divided in their interpretations of the effectiveness of scapegoating strategies. Dutch interviewees indeed mentioned more accommodative strategies, but one of them, excuses, was not positively interpreted. Both Dutch and NSW were overtly positive about the installation of independent inquiries. The positive interpretation is surprising, as research findings are quite mixed about the effectiveness of independent inquiries (cf. Resodihardjo et al, 2012; de Vries, 2006).

For all four strategies, interviewees based their interpretation of the strategy largely on what they considered both appropriate in the political environment and feasible regarding the position of the minister who is under attack. The perceived strength of the minister in terms of reputation (scapegoating and excuses) and policy skills (collective responsibility and independent inquiries) was an important consideration.

**Consequences for the event: absorb or resist?**

In this stage, interviewees mentioned both accommodative strategies focusing on institutional measures and strategies focusing on admitting personal responsibility and culpability. First, only nine NSW interviewees and seven Dutch interviewees mentioned ministers who resist consequences by compensating harm, i.e. allocating budget back to the policy area affected by the incident. More Dutch interviewees and NSW interviewees identified ministers who combine either justifications or apologies with institutional action-taking in the form of announcing new policies or procedures (or agencies). Ministers can announce new measures to support and reinforce both justifications, in showing a ‘never again’ approach, and apologies, in showing the sincerity of the apology. Interviewees in both environments remained quite general in the nature and scope of these new policies or changed procedures, often not mentioning more than a minister ‘fixing the system’. Dutch interviewees almost always invoked the Dutch adagio ‘stepping up and not stepping down’ related to justifications. A NSW interviewee described the combination of justifications and institutional-action taking:

*The Premier would be emphasizing the positives of having this service. Focus on the contrast with all these (old programs) in which Sydney’s both road system and public transport systems, which led behind the needs of commuters. Just emphasizing, you know, these last year’s problems and we’re fixing them, but who would seriously suggest that we’d be better off without this program. Commuters understand how much their lives have been improved by this (ministerial staffer 6)*
In terms of personal responsibility admission, thirty interviewees expected ministers to contrite and apologize, the majority being Dutch (18:12). Interviewees generally expected minister to apologize for the ‘lack of political acumen’ (Dutch minister 1) or ‘for the upheaval caused’ (NSW journalist 2). Only in relation to integrity incidents, did both four Dutch interviewees, and six NSW interviewees specifically expect ministers to swiftly acknowledge wrongdoing and issue an apology in the early stage of the blame game.

A surprising number of interviewees in each environment, expected ministers to absorb consequences by resigning after incidents. This could be partly explained by the fact that all qualitative vignettes hinted at resignations. However, ministers were only expected to do so under exceptional circumstances.

**When to absorb consequences?** Both NSW and Dutch interviewees expected ministers to announce institutional measures when accompanying blame management strategies were feasible.

NSW ministers were more likely to apologize and resign when a considerable number of journalists called for them to do so. However, for both strategies, the position of the ministers’ own party and the position of the Premier were considered crucial. In a similar vein, Dutch ministers were more likely to apologize and resign when a considerable number of moderate opposition parties called for them to do so. However, the position of the coalition partner was considered crucial.

Although resignations were mentioned by almost one-third of the NSW and half of the Dutch interviewees, they iterated this strategy was only employed rarely. Especially in NSW, interviewees would sooner expect the minister to be reshuffled to another portfolio.

**Is responsibility admission effective and appropriate?** In the problem and responsibility admission stage, both Dutch and NSW interviewees were mostly neutral or divided on the outcome of accommodative strategies. In contrast to what expected, Dutch interviewees were quite divided in their interpretation of the accommodative strategies, such as apologies, institutional action-taking and resignation, in this stage. NSW interviewees were either similarly divided, or neutral and positive.

Dutch interviewees’ both denounced strategies which focused on ‘fixing the system’ as platitudes and praised them as learning from mistakes and showing ‘tough action’. NSW interviewees interpreted this strategy similarly. A Dutch journalist explained the ambivalence towards the strategy:

* A political executive can make up for his mistakes by grasping the nettle. If you want to know what I think about it, I would say: sounds nice, sounds good. It fits well with the public appreciation for
vigour... Vigour is appreciated over thoughtfulness, which fits a broader tendency in Dutch politics, but it is also an explanation of ministerial responsibility in which you don’t have to step down as long as you step up. And this undermine its constitutional meaning (Dutch journalist 2).

For ministers, the strategy was on the on hand effective in terms of resisting consequences, but less appropriate due to the erosion of ministerial responsibility as a standard.

Dutch ministers who issued apologies where both more and less blamed for the event. In other words, Dutch ministers who issues apologies were as likely to survive or resign. This more instrumental interpretation of apologies is visible in the quote of a former Dutch parliamentarian.

Advisors often say: [name minister], repent, say sorry, and be humble. This behaviour gives the coalition parties leeway to say: the minister showed understanding; he showed repentance (Dutch parliamentarian 1).

NSW interviewees interpreted apologies more positively. When they gave a positive interpretation of the use of apologies, they assessed the ministers as both effective blame managers and appropriate account-givers.

I think that your chances of survival are always significantly higher by immediate acknowledgement and apology. In almost every circumstance I can think of in the past ten (10) years where ministers have lost their positions, it has most often been because of the cover-up. Not the crime itself. By cover-up I mean the unwillingness to acknowledge the wrongdoing and willingness to apologise, and in some cases the absolute stubborn insistence that they did nothing wrong, despite evidence to the contrary. (NSW minister 4)

Resignation often only related to when the circumstances forced ministers to resign. However, a handful of Dutch interviewees interpreted resignation as an effective way for ministers to avoid blame and to ‘survive’ in terms of a longer political career.

It depends if the junior minister wants to survive politically. Look, if you want to survive in politics, you can also choose the strategy-Donner [minister who resigned over a policy incident and returned in the next government], namely resignation and then a comeback. That is also political survival. You don’t only survive when you stay in office despite everything, you can also survive by showing in your
Resignation was considered more controversial for NSW interviewees, because most NSW interviewees related resignation to problem admission for the government and therefore negative consequences on a broader scale.

Let’s say I become a Health minister, and I am a complete disaster. And I am just in the media every day, with controversial. I tried to move a hospital to Western Sydney right? And people just refuse and I resign right in the middle of it, everyone will go: Aha! What was wrong? So what I have to do is get through it. So this guy here. So the Opposition calls for his resignation, the minister announces to hand over the portfolio to the minister Assisting Transport, his career is over... If you get looped in the middle of something, that is an admission of guilt (NSW ministerial staffer 4)

Table 5.7 shows the interpretations of the interviewees of the responsibility denial strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Conditional upon:</th>
<th>Interpretation (positively/neutral/negatively)</th>
<th>Examples of interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harm compensated</strong></td>
<td>NSW: 9</td>
<td>Position of media and labour unions, budget available, often paired with other strategies</td>
<td>Neutral (6/3)</td>
<td>Mostly paired with other strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch: 7</td>
<td>Budget available, often paired with other strategies</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Mostly paired with other strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional measures</strong></td>
<td>NSW: 15</td>
<td>Strength of minister, position of own party and coalition partner</td>
<td>Almost equal divide (6/5/4)</td>
<td>Fix the system, fixes, tough action, wishy-washy, weasel words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(<strong>fixes</strong> <em>(policy, new agency, etc.)</em>)</td>
<td>Dutch: 20</td>
<td>Strength of minister, often paired with other accommodative strategies, wishes of parliamentary (coalition) parties</td>
<td>Mixed (5/9/6)</td>
<td>show learning, platitude (stepping up not stepping down), real vs symbolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Apologies</strong></td>
<td>NSW: 12</td>
<td>Australian culture, done early in blame game, only in integrity incidents</td>
<td>Positive or neutral (8/4)</td>
<td>Leads to survival, according to public wishes, in line with culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch: 18</td>
<td>Part of other strategies,</td>
<td>Equal divide</td>
<td>Leading to higher blame, lower blame,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[10\] Difficult category, because coding both refers to bigger institutional changes, as over the more ritual-like ‘stepping up, not stepping down’. Need to distinguish better between the two.
Towards Parliament, also integrity incident (5/8/5) show repentance, ‘bowing down’, show respect to Parliament

Culpability - Resignation

NSW: 10
Severe event, blame inescapable, but also for Premier, party liability
Equal divide (5/5)
Shows loyalty to Premier, grand gesture needed to restore confidence, circuit breaker, but also shows you utterly failed, never happens

Dutch: 15
Severe event, blame high, minister repeat offender, cabinet instability, caretaker status
Equal divide (6/3/6)
Grand gesture, show remorse, good for reputation minister and party, but also cheap gesture, election strategy, never happens

Table 5.7: Assessment of strategies in the problem and responsibility admission stage

To summarize, Dutch interviewees mentioned accommodative strategies in this stage more often than NSW interviewees. However, while Dutch interviewees mentioned accommodative strategies more often, they did not necessarily approve of ministers who used accommodative strategies, such as apologies, institutional action-taking and resignation. NSW interviewees were either similarly divided. Both interviewee groups mixed assessments of effectiveness and of appropriateness. Dutch and NSW interviewees related the feasibility of admission strategies to how other media (NSW) and parliamentarians (Dutch) probably assessed the strength of the minister in this stage. However, both interviewee groups focused more and more on ‘high politics’, in other words on the perceived position of the Premier and (coalition) party when explaining which strategies would be effective and appropriate.

Conclusion and discussion

This paper finds that Hood et al’s (2016) conclusion that officeholders commonly respond in ‘a staged retreat’ manner does not translate to more consensual systems. In this cross-system comparison we have demonstrated that for BM too, ‘institutions matter’ (Olsen, 2013; 2015). The political environment seems to matter for how accountability forums and other key players expect ministers to behave when they become the focus of political scrutiny after controversial events.

First, the findings support an institutional perspective of blame management. Although both Dutch and NSW interviewees mentioned ministers using a whole range of strategies, NSW interviewees indeed generally mentioned more confrontational strategies, such as counter attacks and scapegoating, while Dutch interviewees mentioned more accommodative strategies, such as excuses and apologies. This is not in line with the conclusion of Hood and others (2016) that responses to blame follow common patterns across different systems. Institutional practices could matter for how blame is managed in
certain political systems. Blame management research is currently dominated by studies of majoritarian, Westminster systems. This research shows that at least in one consociational environment, elite actors expect different blame management strategies than their majoritarian counterparts. Comparative case studies, including both majoritarian and consensual systems, would enable us to see whether the found differences in elite interpretations are mirrored in elite behaviour in blame games.

Second however, more prominent strategies were often the most contested strategies in their political environments, both in terms of effectiveness and appropriateness. While NSW interviewees expected confrontational strategies more often, they were also equally divided on the effect of these strategies for a ministers’ survival. A similar conclusion can be made for Dutch interviewees interpreting accommodative strategies. Therefore, while Dutch elite actors mention more accommodative strategies and NSW elite actors more confrontational strategies, they were not necessarily preferred. Opposite to what is expected, both Dutch and NSW elite actors preferred the accommodative strategy of announcing independent inquiries. This preference could show that particular (accommodative) strategies can be part of blame management norms, even in confrontational environments. Often, both interviewee groups mixed assessments of effectiveness with interpretations of appropriateness. This is in line with Olsen’s thesis (2015) that political account giving, and thereby blame games related to ministerial responsibility, is also based on what elite actors institutionalized as appropriate in a specific context. Future research is needed to understand how elite actors interpret and sanction strategies of political executives. After all, elite actors are the ones who often play an active role, whether public or not, in supporting, countering and judging ministers’ strategies in blame games. They are the ones who often pass sanctions for political executives after blame games. So far, studies of blame focus on the effect of strategies on acceptance by the public, such as citizens assessments in experiments (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006; James et al, 2016; McGraw, 1991) or on media blame levels (Hood et al, 2009; 2015). In further research, the focus on citizens and media perceptions of blame in blame games could be expanded to include assessment of strategies by the (political) elite actors.

Third, both Dutch and NSW actors conditioned the strategies in each stage, thereby focusing in each stage on different contextual factors. Dutch and NSW actors conditioned problem denial strategies upon the broader environment, as in how other elite actors framed the severity of the event. While NSW elite actors often conditioned the effectiveness or appropriateness of problem denial strategies upon the position of journalists in the blame game, Dutch actors often conditioned the improbability of problem denial strategies upon the general position of (moderate opposition) parliamentarians. The interviewees conditioned strategies in the last stage in a similar manner. In the responsibility denial stage, both Dutch
and NSW interviewees agreed that the personal strength of the minister, in terms of reputation, was an influential condition for the strategies, albeit with different conclusions in each environment. The conclusion that ‘context matters’ is certainly not original, Brändström and Kuipers (2003), Resodihardjo and others (2016) and HInterleitner and Sager (2016) drew similar conclusions. However, limited action has been taken in terms of comparative studies which explicitly include contextual factors in their analysis. Further research is needed to understand the mechanisms which translate contextual differences into diverging blame game processes.

We can conclude that not all elite actors expect ministers to flight-or-fight after blameworthy events. In some environments elite actors prefer ministers to tend-and-befriend. Therefore, the question: ‘what are successful responses to blameworthy events?’ could have different answers for ministers in opposite political environments.

**Sequel: Blame management as performance**

> When I’d just started here as a reporter, I was summoned to a press conference with the Premier. And none of us knew what it was about and none of us thought... Well, I didn’t have any reason to think that it was significant, but he got up and he announced that a minister in the government, the minister for (...), had been arrested earlier in the day, for child sex allegations. Now, that had so much potential to damage or destroy the government, but the brilliance of his strategy was to become the agent of information and simultaneous with people hearing the information, they heard it from the Premier, registered his attitude and heard what the response of the government was going to be. A friend in the governing party said to me: that proves this lesson, that’s is not what happens that really matters, it’s how you deal with it. It’s your response, even something as catastrophic, as the arrest of a minister on child sex challenges can be, I mean it's catastrophic, but it can be politically non-catastrophic, if you deal with it properly.

> - New South Wales ministerial staffer 6

The conclusions presented in the paper could overshadow one of the most pressing results: elite actors not only focused on which strategies ministers would and should use, but also on how ministers should use these strategies in terms of staging their performance, hedging their strategies and telling a compelling story (narrative). Hajer (1995; 645) already pointed out in his work on the politics of environmental discourse that ‘storylines are devices through which actors are positioned, and through which specific ideas of ‘blame' and ‘responsibility’, and of ‘urgency' and ‘responsible behavior’ are attributed’. In a related research area, Hearit (2006) concluded that citizens only consider apologies to be sincere, when they are said in the right tone and the proper setting. In the interviews, elite actors
discussed two ‘storytelling elements’ accompanying blame management strategies: proper speech acts and combining strategies in a coherent story.

Nieuwenburg concludes in his article (2014) on value conflicts and political forgiveness, that if political executives want to be forgiven for moral wrongs ‘in a public procedure, it is important that both sides (political executive and audience) perform their proper speech acts and that they do so in the right order’. These interviewees reflected on ministers’ ability to control the narrative in a blame game by portraying themselves as a reliable source of information about the incident, referred by some as ‘agents of information’. Most NSW interviewees who reflected on ministers as ‘agents of information’ also discussed how ministers should ‘hedge’ their strategies. Hedging refers to the use of guarded language within strategies, such as ‘I am advised’ and ‘to the best of my knowledge’, in order to maintain plausible deniability and room for manoeuvre after an incident. Dutch interviewees more often discussed proper speech acts in relation to Parliament, such as the need to show policy knowledge and skills and to create a good ‘working relation’ with the Lower House of Parliament by showing ‘respect’. In media performances, both NSW and Dutch interviewees referred equally to the need to show sincerity and skill. These findings are in line with Resodihardjo and others’ (2015; 11-12) conclusion that ‘blame management response is more than presentational strategies’ and that the importance of for example rituals, in connecting with the public and showing compassion with victims, should not be underestimated.

When we use Hajer’s (1995; 645) concept of storylines, it follows that elite actors often use more than one strategy at the time, which they weave into a larger, comprehensive, ‘story’. Also in the interviews, both Dutch and NSW interviewees often mentioned ministers combining two or three strategies in order to strengthen the effect of individual strategies. For example, interviewees paired apologies and acknowledgements of ‘wrongdoing’ with promises of institutional action-taking, to show commitment to the promise the incident ‘will never happen again’. In most blame management research, the blame management effect of individual strategies is assessed. A focus on individual strategies could blind us from how ministers use strategies as building-blocks in a larger narrative or storyline.

Therefore, institutions could not only matter for content of blame management, but also for the dramaturgical aspects of blame management. These findings are in line with the work of ‘t Hart (1993), Resodihardjo and others’ (2015; 11-12) and Hearit (2006) who argue the importance of for example rituals and sincerity in blame management. The increasingly sophisticated quantitative work in blame studies is valuable (Hood et al, 2009; 2015; James et al, 2016). However, continued qualitative studies is
necessary, because blame is a concept with many qualitative elements (Hajer, 1995; 645). Further research in the storytelling qualities of political executives’ blame management would further our understanding of institutional aspects of blame management.

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I. The interviewees either experienced a resignation or had enough experience (multiple government terms) to have observed multiple political incidents.

II. Although a spread over different positions does not completely guard the interviewer against self-serving or "party-line" accounts, it helps at least to diminish the bias to some extent (Berry, 2002; 680). The abundance of civil servants with a Justice Department in the Dutch case can be explained by the fact that the Justice-ministers are overrepresented in Dutch ministerial resignations (Bovens et al, 2014).

III. Especially for top civil servants this had a positive influence, as these vignettes helped them to reflect on the issue without the need to reflect on their current political principals.

IV. Finch found in quantitative vignettes that three changes to a story line was the maximum (1987).

V. Depending on the time the interviewees (who often had demanding schedules) had for the interview.

VI. Interviewees often mentioned ministers using multiple strategies to support for example a minister’s responsibility denial. Also, interviewees often discussed more than one vignette in the interview. In other words, the same Dutch interviewee could have mentioned both scapegoating and announcing independent inquiries to support a minister denying responsibility (within one vignette).