

# Rethinking economics: Downs with traction<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Economics is involved with policy, but economic theory has relatively little to say about the policy making process. Governments' economic objectives are assumed to be given. One exception to this is the work of Anthony Downs in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. He considered possible objectives for participants in the political process, these forming a basis for a set of propositions on the operation of a democratic government. He made two key assumptions, namely no false information, and no irrationality. As he acknowledged, neither of these assumptions is realistic in politics. There is extensive literature to this effect, including writing by Adam Smith recognising the role of rhetoric (deliberative eloquence) in political debate, and the significance of propaganda was recognised in the 1940s. Modern approaches to political processes, agenda setting, and discourse analysis also emphasise persuasion, with framing being an important active or passive factor in this process. These relate to broadly held views and could be called “macro-rhetoric”.

In recognition of the literature on rhetoric, this paper builds on Downs' foundation by relaxing his assumptions. First, there is consideration of the nature of rhetoric, including “macro-rhetoric”. This is followed by consideration of the effects of rhetoric on policy debate, and the importance of “traction” on political agendas. As with Downs' presentation, this discussion provides propositions, but these differ from those that he presented. Building on the earlier material, the derived propositions indicate, in particular: policy issues will only be addressed spasmodically; few options will get attention; and there is likely to be poor monitoring. Consideration is then given to implications for economists and their approaches to policy.

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# 1. Introduction

This is the third of six Bristol Business School Economics Papers by Stuart Birks on Rethinking Economics. The full collection is:

- 1212 [An economics angle on the law](#)
- 1213 [Rethinking economics: theory as rhetoric](#)
- 1214 [Rethinking economics: Downs with traction](#)
- 1215 [Rethinking economics: Economics as a toolkit](#)
- 1216 [Rethinking economics: Logical gaps – theory to empirical](#)
- 1217 [Rethinking economics: Logical gaps –empirical to the real world](#)

Paper 1215 gives a general overview of the “economics as a toolkit” approach. Papers 1212 and 1214 illustrate the application. The approach includes three paths or types of potential error. Papers 1213, 1216 and 1217 cover paths A, B and C respectively.

Those trained in economics have come to form a view of the world that has been shaped by their specialisation. However, it is not uncommon for these people to come across real world situations which simply do not fit this world view. One response to this cognitive dissonance is for the problem to be largely ignored. This could fit Kuhn’s (1970) description of those applying “normal science”, or Galbraith’s (1999) of those following the “conventional wisdom”. This does little for those seeking an explanation for what they have observed.

My unease came from experience of policymaking and implementation, including the stated beliefs of those active in these areas. It led me to join the ranks of those looking beyond the conventional economic picture in the hope of finding alternative explanations. It was soon apparent that, outside economics, many academics who are focusing on the *process of policy making* (as opposed to economists identifying policy options) have been critical of what they see as the economics approach. Complex processes in the determination of policy have been described elsewhere. Lindblom described the practice of policy making as “muddling through” (Lindblom, 1959, 1979). Colander has considered such ideas in an economics context, using a similar perspective and terminology (Colander, 2003), but this is essentially on the fringe of economic thinking. Others, as described below, have come from political, news media or other perspectives, often providing very similar suggestions, if from different roots. They suggest that it may be beneficial to consider how rhetorical aspects may influence policy making. Attitudes and public opinion can be shaped, and are important in the determination of and implementation of policies.

Downs (1957) addresses issues in policy making, but subject to restrictive assumptions. He presented a theory of political behaviour, aspects of which have come to be widely acknowledged, even among political scientists. In this he would not be the first academic to have had convenient aspects of his work adopted while the broader context has been ignored. Nevertheless, it is paradoxical in that his theory is based on assumptions that are standard in economics, but that are rejected by political scientists and that he also recognises as unrealistic.

This paper sets the context in the next section with a discussion on rhetoric and presenting the concept of “macro-rhetoric”. Several literature sources are summarised which, collectively, contribute to that concept. Section 3 considers whether the effects of rhetoric might be important for an understanding of economic behaviour. Section 4 builds on this earlier

material to derive some alternative propositions along the lines of Downs, but reflecting a broader range of literature from other disciplines. The results are likely to be more consistent with established and accepted thinking in those areas. They may also be more realistic. In concluding, Section 5 presents some implications.

## 2. “Macro-rhetoric”

A term such as “macro-rhetoric” draws, by analogy, on the economic distinction between microeconomics and macroeconomics. It serves as a unifying concept to bring together traditional rhetoric, which relates to persuasion on a “micro” scale by individuals, commonly in face-to-face contact, and a range of current perspectives on the formation and shaping of social attitudes.

In contrast, modern mainstream economics texts emphasise exogenous preferences. They also assume independently operating decision makers, referred to by Lawson (2003) and others as atomism.<sup>2</sup> This reflects a significant narrowing of perspective since the early days of economics. Adam Smith (1963) gave a series of lectures on rhetoric in 1762 and 1763. This was not remarkable at the time. Smith reflected a long tradition going back several hundred years in Europe (Serjeantson, 2006, pp. 135-136) and dating back to classical Greece whereby both logic and rhetoric were considered central to a good education.

Briefly, we could consider logic to be concerned with proof, whereas rhetoric is concerned with persuasion. When describing the rhetoric of political debate, whereby policy decisions are made, Smith used the term “deliberative eloquence”. He suggested that it is more likely that people would be persuaded by simple points and rhetorical techniques such as humour, the use of analogy, or appeals to authority or to emotion than by detailed, technical, logical arguments (Smith, 1963, p. 139). (See Section 3 below for other examples of people making this point.)

Some more recent analyses could be considered as “macro” approaches to rhetoric. So what might be considered in this “macro-rhetoric” literature, and what might it have to offer?

Literature on the processes of policy making can be seen to draw on the scholarship of rhetoric. Consider Dunn’s eleven “modes of argumentation”, describing ways in which positions can be presented so as to persuade people to a particular viewpoint (Dunn, 2004, pp. 394-418). Logic is not mentioned, and his references to standard economics approaches of theory and econometrics might be considered less than complimentary. He lists “method” (techniques such as econometrics) and “cause” (such as economic “laws” based on theory) among his modes, focusing on their use for rhetorical purposes. People may be swayed by arguments couched in those terms, even if the logic is questionable. While this may sound apocryphal to economists, there is some justification for these views. Economic models and theories are not precise representations of the real world, and it has long been argued that there is rhetoric associated with the application of econometrics (McCloskey, 1998; Ziliak & McCloskey, 2008)

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<sup>2</sup> This goes back at least to Keynes, who distinguished between atomistic and organic systems: “Keynes...regarded the economic system as being organic. Not only does this involve complex interdependencies over time and space, but also the entire economic system is seen as being open; once we allow for human creativity and caprice, that is, for indeterminism, there is not a closed system waiting to be known.” (Dow, 2012, p. 74)

This suggests that the results of studies may be convincing, irrespective of the quality of the studies themselves. Persuasive methods include “authority”, the use of a source or personality that people trust, and “analogy”, applying in one context an approach that people already accept in another (even though it may not, in fact, be suitable). Some of the research techniques that analysts apply may have achieved acceptance on such grounds also. Dunn’s “modes of argumentation” suggest that Downs is making overly strong assumptions about the correctness of information and the rationality of individuals. At the very least, selective presentation of information will give a distorted picture which would not be incorporated into Downs’ model.<sup>3</sup>

Other fields are also relevant. In communication literature, “framing” has been described as involving “selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Weaver, 2007, p. 143). Choices are made as to what information is relevant and what should be ignored, and what story is told using the selected information. In a series of lectures in 1961 Carr (2008) made the point that historians made choices as to what, out of all the available information, would be “the facts”. In economics, given the heavy focus on established models, data series and techniques, this selection is largely prescribed before the researcher even begins the analysis, without the broader selection issue even being considered.

This perspective has also been applied to politics, hence:

“The formal, structural dimension is only one dimension of control over the decision-making process. There is also the more substantive side: policy-makers who take the initiative in **framing** the problem and proposing solutions improve the chances of these solutions being accepted. To this end, the decision-makers may not simply use the force of argument; they may also resort to more manipulative tactics, such as using their monopoly on certain types of policy-relevant information to present their colleagues in the relevant decision units with a highly stylized picture of the issues involved.” (Goldfinch & Hart, 2003, p. 242)

Literature on critical discourse analysis focuses on the use of selected words to emphasise a particular perspective, and on broader approaches to frame issues in desirable ways. Fairclough (1995) refers to “ideological-discursive formations” (IDFs) which groups may use to define issues and circumscribe debate in a way that favours their perspective. This has been applied in sociology. To quote Hay (1996, p. 274), “Gramsci’s ‘war of position’ is in fact a war of competing narratives, competing constructions of crisis, increasingly fought out in the media between conflicting political elites.” Note also Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as described in a study of mass media and politics:

“hegemony is a ruling class’s (or alliance’s) domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and everyday practice; it is the systematic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order.” (Gitlin, 2003, p. 253)

Others have suggested that this may be due to passive compliance rather than engineered dominance, and may be inevitable. Viscount Bryce, in a book first published in 1921, stressed the small number of people who actually make the decisions of government, even in a

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<sup>3</sup> For a fictional account with more than a grain of truth, note *Yes Prime Minister* (Lynn & Jay, 1989, pp. 363-364)

democracy. He contended that those who can influence decisions comprise an “infinitely small” proportion of the population (Bryce, 1929, pp. 596-597).

Fairclough suggests that a particular IDF may dominate to the exclusion of others (a “dominant IDF”). It can be seen as the norm, rather than as a particular perspective. Alternatives may then be seen as ideologically driven and biased in comparison to this “true” picture.

Public perceptions and media presentation of issues will be heavily influenced by dominant terminology and frames. Bertrand Russell made a related point in his essay, “On being open-minded”. He was writing in the 1930s (the essay was first published in *The Nation* in 1937) and so he framed his points in the perspective of an earlier generation. Presenting a possible reason why certain language and views may dominate, and why people may choose to conform to these conventions, he wrote:

“The belief that fashion alone should dominate opinion has great advantages. It makes thought unnecessary and puts the highest intelligence within the reach of everyone. It is not difficult to learn the correct use of such words as 'complex', 'sadism', 'Oedipus', 'bourgeois', 'deviation', 'left'; and nothing more is needed to make a brilliant writer or talker...Quite deliberately [the modern-minded man] suppresses what is individual in himself for the sake of the admiration of the herd.” (Russell, 1950, pp. 66-67)

Russell also described the lack of incentive or reward for those who might consider a more independent path.

From the field of public policy, Considine (2005) describes policy as the result of competition between groups, each trying to create the dominant perspective. In a similar vein, other writers on policy process emphasise the setting and denial of groups’ agendas (Cobb & Ross, 1997b).

Public perceptions are shaped by the information that is transmitted in these processes, so news media literature may be informative. It might be hoped that debate in the news media would result in an informed public. Bourdieu doubts this. He suggests that television favours people whom he terms “fast thinkers” (Bourdieu, 1998). These people give quick answers that will be accepted. Far from thinking, they are simply tapping into currently held beliefs, thereby getting instant audience acceptance and giving the appearance of being knowledgeable. His point could apply to much of the mass media. Similarly, to quote someone known for his writing on economics, Galbraith (1999, p. 10) suggests, “Individuals, most notably the great television and radio commentators, make a profession of knowing and saying with elegance and unctious what their audience will find most acceptable”. As a consequence, dominant frames are emphasised, prior beliefs reinforced, and false perceptions perpetuated. This can have a significant impact on people’s understanding of issues and priorities, at least those for which they have little or no direct personal experience. This point is made by a political philosopher, Hardin. He uses an appealing term, “street-level epistemology”, to describe the way people’s “knowledge” on many issues is simply what they have heard and accepted from others, who have in turn heard the information from elsewhere:

“...the bulk of our knowledge...depends on others in various ways. We take most knowledge on authority from others who presumably are in a position to know it.

Indeed, we take it from others who themselves take it from others and so forth all the way down. There are finally no or at best vague and weak foundations for most of an individual's knowledge." (Hardin, 2002, p. 216)

Such information is not checked out. Hence, it is easy for misinformation to spread and false beliefs to be widely accepted. Related concepts include "proof by repeated assertion", the "availability heuristic" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), and the concept of "communal reinforcement" (Carroll, 2009). Note also, a principle of advertising by Claude Hopkins that he first published in 1927:

"People are like sheep...We judge things largely by others' impressions, by popular favor...when we see the crowds taking any certain direction, we are much inclined to go with them." (Hopkins, 1998, p. 119)

Such phenomena are not restricted to the street. University students absorb received wisdom from academics who, in the main, are conveying an accepted body of knowledge. Displacement of dominant bodies of knowledge can be a slow process, even when the body has numerous identified flaws (Desai, 1981; Gellner, 1964; Kuhn, 1970; Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970).

The implications of these processes and phenomena have long been recognised, as described over 150 years ago in *Extraordinary popular delusions and the madness of crowds* (Mackay, 1995). Mackay describes numerous examples that illustrate his point. Current discussion of moral panics supports a contention that every generation has its own popular delusions. Goleman's description of frames and schema further support the view that societies see their world through particular lenses that shape what they see (Goleman, 1997).

### **3. Economics and logic**

Mainstream economic theory is based on people having preferences that are fixed, or determined "outside the system/model" (exogenous, rather than endogenous, preferences) (Bowles, 1998). There is then no need to explain preference formation. This simplification is convenient, but not very realistic. There is also an assumption that people are "rational". In this context, this means that, given their preferences and available information, they will act in such a way as to do the best they can according to those preferences. There is a presumption that logic dominates.

There is no place for rhetoric or persuasion in such a view of the world. However, at the most fundamental level, rhetoric is unlikely to have even developed as a separate field of study if people were only persuaded by logical arguments. Schopenhauer, in his Stratagem No.28 for winning arguments, makes the point that a logic-based response to rhetorical criticism would not be effective. Such a defence, "would require a long explanation...and a reference to the principles of the branch of knowledge in question, or to the elements of the matter which you are discussing; and people are not disposed to listen to it" (Schopenhauer, c1851). Politicians seem well aware of the value of well-placed words:

"Abraham Lincoln...understood the need for simply presented messages. He explained his wish to use the expression, 'The house divided against itself cannot stand', in a major speech in June 1858, 'I want to use some universally known figure expressed in

simple language as universally well-known, that may strike home to the minds of men...’” (Herndon & Weik, 1961, p. 322)

And:

“Jay Hendrichs argues persuasively that though George W Bush is mocked for his verbal clumsiness, he is actually a highly effective orator. He uses emotive, ethos-laden code words ‘without the distraction of logic. He speaks in short sentences, repeating code phrases in effective, if irrational order’.” (Leith, 2011)

Given Adam Smith’s familiarity with rhetoric, economics appears to have taken a backward step by disregarding this major aspect of policy making and implementation. Downs was well aware of the simplification and the consequences in terms of a lack of realism. Nevertheless, he based his exposition on two such assumptions. This approach is understandable on one level. It is relatively easy to model and analyse a purely logical world. Consideration of rhetoric and endogenous preferences presents major problems for the use of many commonly applied economic methods of evaluation. How are economists to determine costs and benefits if the values that are observed through either actual behaviour or elicitation through surveys, etc., can be influenced by rhetoric and false or misleading information? This is a major limitation to the value of much economic analysis for decision making. Tacit acceptance of the analyses contributes to the rhetoric of economics.

These aspects are likely to be of particular relevance where two conditions hold. First, the issues are those where individuals have little or no direct involvement, so their opinions are not shaped by first-hand experience. Second, the issues require collective action, so that there is little benefit to an individual from acquiring an accurate understanding. These conditions apply for many policy issues. Cobb and Ross (1997a, p. 7) describe initial problem “identification groups”, and the requirement that they gain the support of much larger “attention groups” if an issue is to gain a place on the policy agenda. They also describe mechanisms whereby the agendas of less powerful groups can be denied. These dimensions suggest a dynamics to political processes that cannot be addressed by assuming fixed preferences.

Lakoff and Johnson, in a key text, emphasise the importance of metaphor, suggesting that our perceptions can be distorted because much of our understanding arises indirectly. Hence:

“...many aspects of our experience cannot be clearly delineated in terms of the naturally emergent dimensions of our experience. This is typically the case for human emotions, abstract concepts, mental activity, time, work, human institutions, social practices, etc... Though most of these can be *experienced* directly, none of them can be fully comprehended on their own terms. Instead, we must understand them in terms of other entities and experiences, typically other *kinds* of entities and experiences.” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 177)

This quote suggests that our actual perceptions are a synthesis of objective and subjective aspects. They make the point that objectivism misses the fact that understanding depends on how the world is framed, and subjectivism misses the fact that framing, or a “conceptual system” “is grounded in our successful functioning in our physical and cultural environments” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 194). This last point may explain why there can

be greater problems with policy and implementation issues, as they are less closely associated with our individual functioning.

Downs' approach was to present several propositions that were plausible given his assumptions. The following section takes a similar approach, but relaxes Downs' assumptions on rationality and the absence of false information, hence assuming a "macro-rhetoric" environment.

#### **4. Downs with traction**

Anthony Downs presented 25 "specific testable propositions" in *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Downs, 1957). These were based on assumptions about the political system, including the motives of politicians and voters. In his description he includes detailed consideration of uncertainty and the implications of there being costs associated with information gathering. Despite this being good grounds for misinformation and the use of heuristics, he states, "Throughout this thesis, we assume that no false (i.e. factually incorrect) information exists..." (Downs, 1957, p. 46). He also states, "Our model in particular ignores all forms of irrationality and subconscious behavior even though they play a vital role in real world politics" (Downs, 1957, p. 34). These assumptions are commonly found in economics, but they are extreme and may give a distorted view.

Traction is a term frequently used by politicians and in the news media to indicate that an issue has attention. It is not a precisely defined term, although it has acquired widespread usage and acceptance. Its applicability in particular instances arises from a perception or belief by decision makers that the issue has assumed sufficient prominence in terms of concern by relevant people. It could be considered to indicate that an issue has been placed on an agenda, as in agenda setting and denial (Cobb & Ross, 1997a). While a precise definition would be preferable, loose recognition of a characteristic in this way is not unknown. Consider Rawls' approach in *Justice as fairness: a restatement*: "The terms 'reasonable' and 'rational' will not be explicitly defined. We gather their meaning by how they are used and by attending to the contrast between them" (Rawls, 2001, p. 82).

The concept of traction is important when considering policy success. Points can be made, and evidence presented, but without traction there is unlikely to be the interest or support for an issue to gain a prominent position on a policy agenda. Even if an issue is important to a dominant political party, the party risks unpopularity and resistance if it proceeds without popular acceptance. There is a close association with rhetoric, both micro and macro, in that these latter consider how people can be persuaded to see issues in particular ways. The need for traction is a constraint on political activity, and it also suggests an arena in which political contests take place. The following general points and associated propositions are not comprehensive. Rather, they are an attempt to indicate, in a Downs-like framework, some of the important implications of this activity. They have been derived from direct experience of policy formulation and political debate, evaluated in the context of the bodies of literature outlined above.

##### *4.1 A limited number of issues*

The operation of the media and the importance of "traction" suggest that Downs' approach could be modified to consider agenda-setting and the shaping of observed preferences. For the purposes of an exploratory investigation, consider the possibility that there can only be a limited number of policy issues on the agenda at any one time. There are broad reasons for



this. Simon, on “attention scarcity”, writes, “. . . a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it” (Simon, 1971, pp. 40-41). Consider a basic economic assessment. There are costs of gathering and processing information, and there are, at least initially, economies of scale in gathering information on specific issues. The news media are important for the transmission of this information, and they influence the number of issues addressed and the quality and nature of information presented. This point is discussed further in Birks (2008). Also, Hardin’s concept of “street-level epistemology” suggests that people take their knowledge from others without much individual critical assessment (Hardin, 2002). This is closely linked to critical discourse analysis (CDA), whereby the form of presentation of information shapes people’s perceptions. As items on the political agenda require co-ordinated action, it is generally not enough for interested individuals to develop a degree of understanding on their own. However, it is easy to “overload” the system, “Large public problems. . . periodically require a synchrony of public attention. This is more than enough to crowd the agenda to the point of unworkability or inaction” (Simon, 1971, p. 47).

The general public may only be willing or able to consider a few options at a time, but politicians who wish to set agendas will also seek to limit the options available for discussion. Whatever the reason, it has been observed that “. . . for any problem at the regime or macro-level of discussion and analysis **there are remarkably few alternatives actually under debate**” (Bosso, 1994, p. 184). Similarly (original emphasis), “There are billions of potential conflicts in any modern society, but *only a few become significant*” (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 66).

Consequently it is plausible to suggest that issues are not set by individuals, as might be assumed in economic theory based on atomistic individuals each with their own exogenous preferences. Rather, it may be more realistic to consider them set by politicians, pressure groups and the news media, after which individuals form their opinions. This may be a large adjustment for formal models as commonly used in economics. However, in a general description without restrictive assumptions it is only a small step. The result is that it opens up the possibility of a synthesis of the approaches. This gives a first proposition under a traction approach:

**Proposition 1:** There is a limited number of issues with traction at any one time.

#### *4.2 Parties competing for traction*

Parties select issues either because they fit their policy agenda or because they believe that they will win votes. If an issue has traction, it has public attention. Consequently, voters are likely to believe that something should be done about it. Hence there will be voter support for policies that are perceived to be addressing issues with traction. As parties are competing against each other, their aim is to achieve traction on their issues, but not on those of other parties. This is central to the themes of agenda setting and denial (Cobb & Ross, 1997b), where agenda denial limits the traction on denied issues. Hence the claim, “the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power” (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 68). This gives a second proposition:

**Proposition 2:** Parties aim to achieve traction on their issues and prevent traction on others.

#### *4.3 Parties' reaction to issues with traction*

If an issue already has traction, either through the action of other parties or pressure groups, or through the media, or via international transmission of policy issues, parties will feel obliged to have policies on those issues. This is because they are backing issues that have widespread attention, and because failure to address the issues would suggest indecision and lack of an agenda.

**Proposition 3:** Parties back issues with traction.

#### *4.4 Creation of new issues*

It is harder to generate traction for a new issue than to present policies for an issue that already has traction. Also, there is a limited number of issues with traction, but numerous other issues which are not receiving attention. It can be difficult to focus attention on a new issue at the expense of prevailing recognised concerns. This might explain why more attention may be given to the process of achieving and maintaining awareness than to debate on the details of policy issues, options and responses (rhetorical matters rather than analysis).

**Proposition 4a:** Parties are more likely to invest in an issue with traction than to generate traction for a new issue.

Besides agenda denial strategies, there can be conspiracies of silence to overcome, "...whereby people tacitly agree to publicly ignore something of which they are all personally aware" (Zerubavel, 2007, p. 181). This is further illustrated:

"Watching Peter disregard a distinctly audible comment...may lead Paul to consider it irrelevant and thereby disregard it as well, yet watching Paul also ignore it may in turn reinforce Peter's initial impression that it was indeed irrelevant. We basically have here a vicious cycle" (Zerubavel, 2007, p. 187).

This could extend to the entire realm of political matters, which, as Eliasoph (1998) described, can become a taboo subject within a social network due to the social riskiness of voicing political opinions. This phenomenon has been more generally described as the 'elephant in the room'. So society, or groups in society, may fail to discuss significant policy issues. In general, this is unlikely to be rectified through the news media, which aim to appeal to the public and therefore focus on issues that are known to be of interest, as discussed further below.

**Proposition 4b:** The media tend to reinforce the prevailing pattern of issues with traction.

Sowell (2004) suggests that organisations initially established to promote affirmative action face inbuilt pressures to grow. The same could apply to organizations more generally. Hence organizations can be expected to seek new dimensions for their issues so as to have a continuing reason to exist. Similar points are made by Schattschneider (1960) and in literature on historical institutionalism.

**Proposition 4c:** Institutions that have been established due to an issue with traction aim to maintain that traction through expansion of the issue.

#### *4.5 Shifting public opinion*

Many policy issues are beyond the scope of individual action, and therefore have received little individual attention. Concern for such issues depends in part on the concern expressed by others. If something is considered by many to be important, more people will invest time and emotional energy into being concerned. Cobb and Ross would say that an issue has successfully spread beyond the “identification group”, being understood by the “attentive public” and adopted by some of the “attention groups” (Cobb & Ross, 1997a, pp. 7, 21). Hardin (2002) might suggest that the position is spread through street-level epistemology. Downs (1972), writing some years after the publication of his theory, hypothesised that many issues are subject to an “issue attention cycle”, whereby interest and support can be generated for a time among members of the wider community.

**Proposition 5a:** As an issue generates traction, public opinion will swing further in its favour.

When the government promotes a particular issue or position, there is a greater belief that something can be done about it. Also, there is perhaps a natural tendency for people to align themselves with the prevailing authority as suggested by the Stockholm syndrome and described by Strentz, who writes of, “the common occurrence of people adopting the values and beliefs of a new government to avoid social retaliation and punishment” (Strentz, 2005, p. 247). In part, these effects may arise because issues closely related to the government are more newsworthy, especially if fronted by official spokespeople who thereby lend their authority to the positions they take. “Officialness makes the news statist, that is, it contributes to a tendency to cover state voices rather than civil ones...” (Schudson, 2003, p. 54). There may also be important ‘processes of attitude change’ to consider.

**Proposition 5b:** The public will tend to move in favour of policies promoted by the current government.

#### *4.6 The use of traction*

If traction is the key to success in getting policies adopted, then this will be a major focus for political parties. Rhetorical strategies will be used to achieve traction. Reasoned analysis and argument may not be required. In fact, this can be counter-productive if it is less likely to attract public attention than other approaches more suited to the prevailing media. Instead, careful choice of language, or framing, has been advocated for the New Zealand Labour Party:

“Use language to create identity... Create an identity for Labour that mirrors positive core values of decent New Zealanders – so that people know what Labour is without having to talk about issues” (Curran, 2006, p. 9).

A similar approach towards the climate change debate is described by Broder (2009). Even among politicians, simple presentation of issues may be preferred. Then it is easier to obtain consensus and to present policy proposals in a clear and convincing way. Keynes (1937, p. 18) was aware of this when he wrote, “There is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult”.

**Proposition 6a:** It is easier to generate traction through authority, celebrity support or framing than through detailed, informed presentation of information.

If an issue has traction, then it may provide more persuasive grounds than valid, reasoned argument as a basis for a policy change. For example, the New Zealand government raised nurses' pay in 2006 on the basis that, as a woman-dominated occupation, there must have been discrimination against them resulting in low pay. This argument was used in preference to a probably sounder (economics/market-forces based) case that the prevailing rates of pay were insufficient to overcome a nursing shortage. The discrimination argument suited and reinforced the position presented in Department of Labour and Human Rights Commission documents (Crossan, 2004; Mintrom & True, 2004). This may have been an easier way to obtain the desired result, and it served to reinforce the broader issue, thus giving broader political benefits.

**Proposition 6b:** An issue with traction may be used as a false justification for a policy rather than a more logically-based alternative.

#### *4.7 The importance of process*

A major focus of politicians' attention is on obtaining and maintaining public support, publicly measured by relative performance in the polls. This is necessary, if only for political survival. Downs describes his model as being "based on the assumption that every government seeks to maximise political support" (Downs, 1957, p. 11). This is then interpreted as vote-maximisation (Downs, 1957, p. 31). Given the importance of rhetoric, and arguably a need for apparently decisive government, there is limited scope for open, logical policy development with detailed consideration of and evaluation of the options. Instead, the actual policy direction may have already been decided, and the requirement is then simply to follow expected processes (such as consultation, and possibly public submissions) (March & Olsen, 1989). Tyler (2000), writing on 'procedural justice', describes this in terms of the importance of process as a basis for legitimacy of decisions, and people's willingness to accept the results if the required processes are followed. March and Olsen also refer to the importance of process and limited concern for outcomes in political deliberation. Information is required to symbolise and signal "decision making propriety", and intentions are more important than outcomes for legitimacy (March & Olsen, 1989, pp. 48-52).

There are other indications of the importance of process, groups and issues with traction. "For the last decade or so, New Zealand's political leaders have sought to retain power by placating and balancing narrow short-term political interest groups...incremental decisions favouring special interests have tended to take precedence over bold decisions favouring the majority" (Jennings, 2009). Former New Zealand cabinet minister Tim Barnett MP has been quoted as saying, "The frustration in politics is that it's hard to be strategic, as you are living for the next issue and the next day and it's quite media focused and you're always trying to get coverage for what you're saying and what you're doing" (Gates & Williams, 2009). His cabinet colleague, Steve Maharey MP's valedictory speech in the House on 25 September 2008 made reference to public debate of policy issues, with politicians, "being forced to watch every word they say or being driven to release the next 3-point plan or new initiative to feed a 24-hour cycle of news and entertainment".

**Proposition 7:** The focus in politics is more on the process of policy change than on the determination of desirable policies.

#### *4.8 Limited monitoring and policy revision*

Governments aim to implement their agendas. Parties in opposition attempt to obstruct governments. One way to do this is to identify problems that can be presented as government's failures and needing urgent attention, thereby drawing political resources away from the planned agenda. Opposition parties may also attempt to get traction for their own agenda items. Monitoring generates attention. Detailed monitoring provides information that can detract from a government's agenda and gives ammunition for opposition parties. Given the limited number of issues on the agenda at any one time (see Proposition 1), such distractions can be costly to governments. It is therefore in a government's interest to allow as little attention as possible to be given to existing policies/laws. Revision of laws will only occur when problems are noticeable enough, and generate sufficient interest by attention groups, to gain traction.

**Proposition 8a:** A government will attempt to limit monitoring so as to minimise attention given to issues that are not on its agenda.

**Proposition 8b:** Once a law has been passed, it is unlikely to be evaluated or reconsidered for many years.

## **5. Implications**

This paper has presented a concept of 'macro-rhetoric' and derived a set of propositions building from a range of literature beyond the normal bounds of economics. While this literature may use different terms and are applied in various contexts, collectively they fall under the broad umbrella of rhetoric, how and why people come to see things as they do.

There is a marked difference between these approaches and the behavioural assumptions of mainstream economics. Economics based on exogenous preferences inevitably ignores rhetoric, with its focus on persuasion. This omission would inevitably limit the value of economic analysis, especially in areas involving deliberation on indirect or collective policy issues.

Within economics there is one theoretical, idealised approach to policy making. It can be described as follows. If there is free, perfect information (a parallel to the zero transaction cost assumption), then all possible policy alternatives can be considered. For each alternative, all the costs and benefits can be identified and measured. The optimal policy can then be selected using an appropriate decision rule. Given economists' application of the concept of perfect competition to intervene in cases of market failure, it might not be surprising also to see procedures designed to reflect the policy making ideal. A policy assessment structure based on this approach has been developed for general use by New Zealand's Ministry of Economic Development (Regulatory Impact Analysis Unit, 2007).

Even without consideration of costs of analysis with its associated requirements of information and expertise, an economic approach may not be politically feasible due to competing groups and agendas and the rhetoric of political discourse. In such an environment, parties select their preferred policies, after which they operate in a political arena to put their policies into practice. Detailed scrutiny at this late stage would generally be unwelcome, especially where it involves consideration of numerous alternative options (including those of opposition parties). Economists should therefore be aware of the constraints on policy determination arising from the political process. To quote Simon:

“The dream of thinking everything out before we act, of making certain we have all the facts and know all the consequences, is...the dream of someone with no appreciation of the seamless web of causation, the limits of human thinking, or the scarcity of human attention.” (Simon, 1971, p. 47)

As has been discussed in this paper, in disciplines other than economics a range of concepts, collectively “macro-rhetoric”, are emphasised. In particular, framing, the choice of language and promotion of key terms, and agenda setting and denial are considered by some outside economics to be central components of political and social activity. Hardin’s “street-level epistemology”, along with Mackay’s popular delusions, also suggests that at times viewpoints and ideas can become widely accepted without being strongly justified. Processes whereby groups may be motivated to become active are described by Cobb and Ross, Schattschneider and others.

While Downs (1957) focused on politics, there are limitations on the relevance of his propositions in that they are based on assumptions of rationality and absence of false information. This paper indicates some of the possibilities when Downs’ approach is taken together with some of the points in the policy-related literature. As shown, it is possible to develop alternative propositions which incorporate concepts and observations from a broad range of academic literature and which provide arguably a far more realistic representation of the policy making process. The propositions that are presented above collectively paint an interesting picture of an environment in which people are persuaded to subscribe to particular viewpoints and policy decisions are made. While any theoretical viewpoint is merely describing an analogous structure to the real world, it may be emphasising some aspects which are important.

The picture is one of a limited number of issues commanding attention at any one time, with groups and parties competing to control or influence the agenda. Where an issue has enough attention to gain traction, parties will take a position on that issue. They are less likely to try to promote a new issue, and the news media will generally focus on issues which have already achieved traction. Where institutions have been established in relation to an issue, those institutions have an incentive to promote and broaden the issue. Public opinion tends to follow issues that are seen to have wider support or are supported by the current government. It is guided not so much by reasoned debate as by authority, celebrity endorsement and framing. Plausible arguments may be used when they are persuasive and politically desirable even though they may not stand up to rigorous scrutiny. The political focus, as described in the relevant political literature, tends to be more on agenda setting and denial, competing for public attention and political support on issues, rather than on deliberation on policy options. Governments will not wish to have attention drawn to issues that are not on the agenda, including laws that have been passed, and so monitoring on these matters will not be encouraged.

The implications for policy are important. There are clear possibilities of failure in the policy making process and errors may not be identified for many years. Consequently it may be productive for analysis to consider two responses. First, potential limitations in the political process should be recognised. Second, as limitations of the process are also limitations in policy formulation and implementation, resulting constraints on the potential effectiveness of policies should be recognised. Economists’ policy recommendations should not simply reflect the requirements of an ideal structure within which atomistic private sector decision

makers then operate. Their recommendations are, in practice, feeding into a complex system of deliberation and persuasion that shapes both choice of policies and outcomes in terms of policy implementation. This would suggest that economists may be able to make a valuable contribution by following actual policy debate more closely. Their research and public presentation of findings could then be aimed directly at improving the level of understanding of economic aspects of policy decisions and increasing critical commentary and monitoring of policies. Results could then also be placed in a context in which their value can be readily appreciated by the wider community. To end with two rhetorical questions, can economists afford to ignore the role of politics when analysing the economy and economic policy? Prevailing behaviour would suggest so, in which case, why is it more convenient for academics to stay in the frying pan rather than jumping in the fire?

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