Review

Reviewed Work(s): Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies, Boston by John W. Kingdon

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Source: *Journal of Public Policy*, May, 1985, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May, 1985), pp. 281-283

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3998335

Jnl Publ. Pol., **5**, 2, 281–287

Book Reviews

John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1984, xi + 240 pp., $9.95.

The pilgrims to Samarkand, it is said, chanted in unison:

We shall go
Always a little further.

Their joy lay not in arriving at their destination but in the journey itself. Social scientists probably ought to read John Kingdon's new book in the same spirit. The problems he deals with, and the points he makes in the course of dealing with them, are considerably more interesting – as he himself probably recognizes – than the conclusions he finally draws.

Kingdon begins by asking two related questions. First, what factors determine at any given time which items are and are not on the political agenda, i.e., are and are not being considered by policy makers with a view to possible governmental action? Second, given that an item is on the political agenda, what factors determine which alternative courses of action the policy makers do and do not take into account as they move towards their final decision? It goes without saying that these questions are worth asking: any case study of privatization in Britain, for instance, would be bound to ask how privatization, scarcely discussed in the 1960s, became central to the politics of the 1980s. Kingdon's method of answering the questions was to take two policy areas in the United States, health and transportation, to interview over a four-year period policy makers in these two areas and to prepare twenty-three detailed case studies of policy making in the areas over the past three decades.

In the course of setting out his findings and his thoughts on his findings, the author makes a large number of good points. He observes, for example, that if one looks closely at policy making one can distinguish among a 'policy stream' (consisting of ideas which policy makers are working with and thinking about), a 'problem stream' (consisting of problems that policy makers feel that they must confront, whether or not they have policies or ideas for dealing with them) and a 'political stream' (consisting of the flow of political events, which moves forward largely independently of policies and problems). To revert to the British example, privatization did not really emerge onto the political agenda until it had entered both the policy stream (as the result of thinking in the Centre for Policy Studies, the Institute of Economic Affairs and elsewhere) and also the political stream (following the Conservatives' victory at the 1979 general election). Interestingly, the problem that privatization was originally meant to solve (inefficiency and lack of competitiveness in the public sector) was rapidly supplemented, some would say supplanted, by an entirely different problem (the government's need to raise money to keep down the public sector borrowing requirement). The three streams are to a considerable extent separate empirically and, as Kingdon says, are certainly worth keeping separate in one's mind.

More generally, Kingdon is right to emphasize the importance of abstract ideas in determining the political agenda (e.g., economic thinking about

deregulation in the United States in the 1970s) and also the crucial role that a nation's political 'mood' can play (e.g., the reaction against 'big government' in the US during the same period). The book is full of good political and bureaucratic lore. Kingdon points out, for example, that fights over jurisdictional turf, far from inhibiting action (as is usually assumed), may actually stimulate it, as those warring over turf compete with each other to claim both jurisdiction and credit. Personal experience, he points out, matters more than most people realize. American politicians fly in airplanes all the time; they seldom ride buses. Air transport is thus permanently on the US political agenda; bus transport seldom is. Quantitative indicators are also peculiarly important. The countable (e.g., ridership in public transport) is almost always assigned more weight than the uncountable (e.g., quality of service). Not surprisingly, 'constructing an indicator and getting others to agree to its worth become major preoccupations of those pressing for policy change' (p. 98). All good stuff – and the book contains much more of the same.

The trouble is that it does not really add up to anything; or, to be both fairer and more precise, it does not add up to the general theory of agenda-setting that Kingdon was clearly aiming at. The author dismisses the rational-actor model, on the usual ground that it wholly fails to conform to reality. He also dismisses the incrementalist model, pointing out, correctly, that many of the most important policy changes (e.g., Medicare and the interstate highway programme) are not incremental in character but resemble something much more like quantum leaps. But, these two theories having been dismissed, all that the author can put in their place is a variant of the familiar 'garbage can' model – which is not really a model at all but rather, as in this case, a long check-list of factors that a social scientist interested in a specific instance of agenda-setting is advised to keep an eye out for. Kingdon's list is a good one and contains original elements; but, to repeat, it is not really a theory. One small sign that all is not going well is that, under pressure, Kingdon retreats into a veritable jungle of metaphors, the increasingly bemused reader being offered, in no particular order, not just streams and garbage cans but also floodgates, windows, anchors, spillovers, bandwagons, many a fertile ground and, not least, a 'policy primeval soup'.

In addition to the failure of a general theory to emerge, there is another problem, admittedly more rhetorical than substantive. Perhaps because he was conducting original research but at the same time was under contract to write a textbook, the author cannot seem to decide what kind of audience to address. On the one hand, many of his data and ideas are too recondite for a student audience and almost certainly should have been published as journal articles or a scholarly monograph. On the other, his professional colleagues will find too much of the treatment here wordy, repetitious and, very occasionally, platitudinous. They will also be disappointed that the research design, crucial to an understanding of the whole enterprise (and one that raises some difficult methodological questions), is relegated to an appendix.

All that said, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* remains an important and frequently stimulating book. Samarkand may be a disappointment, but the journey in that direction is interesting and worthwhile. Moreover, the book leaves the reader with the feeling that, if Kingdon has not succeeded in producing a general theory of political agenda-setting, it is not his fault. Given the huge variety of factors involved, and given the variety of historical and political

circumstances in which political agendas come to be set, a truly general theory – one that is both general and a theory – is probably beyond the reach of anyone.

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David Dery, *Problem Definition in Policy Analysis*, Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas 1984, 160 pp, $19.95.

Problem definition has always been considered as a part of policy analysis. Although it is explicitly assumed to be an integral part of the policy process and its importance is always being pointed out, for some reason it has never been studied in depth. It is the merit of David Dery to make problem analysis the subject of his monograph. The central message of Dery's book is that problems are not objective entities 'out there', but have to be understood in a practical, normative sense, involving an interventionist's viewpoint: 'Problem definition . . . is a medium through which we discover what we realistically want, how we may go about to obtain it' (p. 9). He emphasizes the selective character of problem definition as practically solvable problems as opposed to a problem perception derived from ideal, unobtainable goals on the one hand, and as opposed to the mere analytical concept of 'social problem' in sociological literature. In his view, problems are to be considered as 'opportunities for improvement'; their definition has to be guided by feasibility considerations.

Dery very emphatically questions the view according to which policy analysis should not bother about problem definition and (therefore) goal setting, but should leave them to the politician and administrator. 'To define a problem is to choose what goals or values to aim at, what values to sacrifice . . .' (p. 116). In stressing the character of problems as 'opportunities' instead of being 'discrepancy' or 'causality' oriented, Dery makes an interesting point concerning the current discussions about the success or failure or reform policies: Since we often do not know what the causes of social problems are, much less are able to manipulate the assumed causes of social problems, social policy often ends up in resignation. Similarly, the strict comparison between a desired and a given state of social conditions tacitly assumes that there is *the* solution to social problems. In Dery's view the standard evaluation research tends to strengthen this faulty understanding of problems. Instead – argues Dery – problems should be understood as 'opportunities', as a whole range of activities possibly improving the present situation.

In coauthorship with Stanley Cohen, a sociologist, Dery uses the problem of juvenile delinquency to demonstrate that we should not analyze causes of social problems and deduce from them what we should do about them, because all too often this leads to the resigned view, that nothing can be done fundamentally to make the causes of the problem disappear. Rather we should think about what things can further be improved. 'The problem now is how to improve children's play facilities and not how to decrease vandalism' (p. 52).

From his normative viewpoint, Dery argues convincingly that there is no such thing as an inherently complex or simple policy. Rather, complexity derives from the interrelatedness and the conflictual character of multiple targets involved in a problem, resulting in conflicting political demands. To illustrate his point Dery