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Rethinking the policy process in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Book Review

Sonia MAZEY & Jeremy RICHARDSON (Eds.), *Policymaking Under Pressure: Rethinking the policy process in Aotearoa New Zealand*

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Policymaking Under Pressure: Rethinking the policy process in Aotearoa, New Zealand

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Jeremy Richardson

Mazey, Sonia & Richardson, Jeremy (Eds.), Canterbury (New Zealand): Canterbury University Press, 2021, 316 p., ISBN 9781988503240. Softback: \$49.99
2021

This book seeks to bring together highly experienced academics and practitioners (including former ministers and their advisers) to provide an honest assessment of New Zealand's policy process. While the editors are professors of public policy, the contributors come from a wide range of positions in relation to New Zealand government, and the book is written to spark debate about what has gone well and poorly. Given this approach, and New Zealand's international status, it should enjoy a wide audience.

This approach may be surprising to some, since New Zealand has emerged with a strong external reputation in dealing with recent crises (not least COVID-19), and governments do not have a strong incentive to describe their faults to that wider audience. Further, insider stories from New Zealand tend to emphasize the positives regarding its people (driven by a sense of public service), governance (high levels of social capital prompt high trust in government) and policy community (the cliché that everyone knows everyone) (see for example, Dunne Chapter 7; Gluckman, Chapter 10; Wevers, Chapter 15).

Of course, there is a way to present such critical assessments as positives in their own right: we "have a public policy-making system that generally works well", but are committed to "the never-ending search for better public policies" (Key, p. 16). Indeed, there may be less scope to soul search in political systems (such as in the UK) where things often go badly and the incentive is to close ranks.

However, Mazey and Richardson (p23) have other ideas, avoiding the sense that New Zealand is simply special, and describing major policy problems that need to be faced head-on: "we have a long-standing housing crisis, increasing levels of child poverty and inequality, lower productivity levels and wages than comparable countries, declining educational standards, grossly polluted waterways and failing infrastructure. We could go on". The book also highlights the legacy of New Zealand's mistreatment of Indigenous people (primarily Māori) in multiple chapters (see, in particular, Chapter 3 by Tumahai).

Mazey and Richardson situate such problems in an international context, to seek to "explain why there are so many policy failures across so many problems" (p23). Their list of possibilities will be familiar to IRPP readers. First, governments face a never-ending collection of unpredictable and complex (often "wicked") policy problems, in crowded political systems with many competing demands. Second, they often respond by managing the policy agenda – such as holding inquiries, or reforming government, to look like they are responding – rather than the underlying problems. Third, there is only some scope to learn from domestic and international experience, and only so much energy to reform government, prompting the superficial adoption of popular ideas like New Public Management (NPM). Fourth, previous government policies and policymaking reforms have unintended consequences on current policy, such as when previous policies on roads undermine climate change adaptation, or NPM reforms exaggerated the loss of central control and lack of joined-up government. Fifth, "implementation failure" is the inevitable result of policymaking complexity (and mistakes). Finally, their concluding chapter adds a tendency towards short-termism and reactive policymaking, with few incentives to engage in long-term and anticipatory policymaking. The result is a tendency to store up trouble in relation to crises (such as climate change, high levels of population obesity, poverty, and low productivity) that cannot be solved in the same way as short term crises.

Individual chapters take forward this dual focus on an image of success qualified by signs of failure. For example, Easton (Chapter 2) warns that New Zealand's tendency towards consensus politics often stores up trouble, with major policy change only possible after major crisis (or

a brief but damaging 1984-93 experiment with NPM and top-down policymaking). Tumahai (Chapter 3) notes that this image of consensus seeking is misleading, since successive governments have engaged in cosmetic consultation and made policies that ignore the promises made to Indigenous populations (compare with Eagleson Chapter 8 on governing in partnership with the Māori Party). March (Chapter 19) highlights the limited extent to which national and subnational governments have addressed issues of welfare and poverty.

In the main, most chapters – mostly providing “insider perspectives” – reinforce key aspects of the general picture described by Mazey and Richardson. They include Carr (Chapter 4) on the problems with major healthcare and monetary policy reforms, Dalziel (Chapter 6) on limits to government policies during a series of dispiriting economic and natural disasters, English (Chapter 9) on enduring wicked problems, Gluckman (Chapter 10) on the limits to central co-ordination, Kay (Chapter 11) on silo working, Hughes and Scott (Chapter 12) on fragmented government, Knight (Chapter 13) on New Zealand’s failure to live up to its (1990s) reputation for environmental leadership, Parkin (Chapter 14) on the patchy use of evidence for policy (although compare with Hague, Chapter 17), and Hope (Chapter 18) on the government’s complex and ineffective rules to regulate business. While more positive, Cunliffe (Chapter 5) shows that even New Zealand’s exemplary response to the short-term impact of COVID-19 had unintended consequences (such as on housing costs, described more fully by Crampton, Chapter 16), and its longer term policymaking remains a “work in progress” (p. 96).

Indeed, there are so many limitations described by such a large number and wide range of people that we are left with quite a depressing comparative conclusion: if New Zealand represents an example of relatively successful policymaking, and this is how bad things are, how bad must it be in governments with poor reputations?!

By Chapter 22, Mazey and Richardson have definitely succeeded in putting aside the “rose-tinted spectacles” often used to interpret New Zealand’s politics and policymaking. However, in doing so, they have set themselves quite the challenge: to “be careful to not beat ourselves about the head”, and focus instead on “improving the policy-making process”, to avoid being perceived as ‘problem-wallowers’ rather than ‘problem-solvers’ (p. 281).

In that context, multiple accounts do focus on what has gone well and what reforms may help to improve basically good policymaking (for example, Smyth, Chapter 20 on organisational change, and Wagstaff, Chapter 21 on participation and co-design). Overall, they consist of one part *agency* (foster the characteristics and strategies of effective policy makers and champions), one part *organisation* (boost coordinative capacity and join up functions), and one part *structure or environment* (a complex and rapidly changing world necessitates high adaptive capacity). Mazey and Richardson (pp. 290-291) also describe the potential value of (a) Sweden-style commissions to encourage more deliberation and long-term thinking not tied to unusually short election cycles, (b) boosting policy capacity and skills to foster the greater use of evidence for policy, and (c) more fundamental reforms to address the New Zealand government’s failure – in policy and policymaking – to “address the specific needs of Māori (and Pacific) communities” (pp. 293-295).

However, in the context of so many chapters on limitations, it is tempting to conclude that the authors and editors are describing what they would like to see rather than what actually did – or could – make things better. In other words, these accounts highlight a classic academic distinction between simple models of policymaking built on functional requirements (we need to define problems clearly, generate evidence-informed solutions, provide sufficient resources to

implement, and so on) versus policy theory informed accounts that explain the gaps between those requirements and policymaking reality. The book actually does a better job, than most policy theories, of exposing the bleak realities of the complex policymaking environments that cause major gaps between hope and reality. Whether or not it provides a better guide to policymaking improvement is a different matter. Nevertheless, the editors and authors have delivered a truly excellent and provocative way to seek to do better.