Introduction

1 *Governing after crisis*

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The politics of crisis management: an introduction

In all societies, life as usual is punctuated from time to time by critical episodes marked by a sense of threat and uncertainty that shatters people's understanding of the world around them. We refer to these episodes in terms of crisis.

Crises are triggered in a variety of ways; for example, by natural forces (earthquakes, hurricanes, torrential rains, ice storms, epidemics and the like) or by the deliberate acts of 'others' ('enemies') inside or outside that society (international conflict and war, terrorist attacks, large-scale disturbances). But they may also find their roots in malfunctions of a society's sociotechnical and political administrative systems (infrastructure breakdowns, industrial accidents, economic busts and political scandals).

Some crises affect communities as a whole (think of floods or volcanic eruptions), others directly threaten only a few members of the community, but their occurrence is widely publicised and evokes incomprehension, indignation or fear in many others (child pornography rings, police corruption, bombing campaigns). Yet the very occurrence of critical episodes casts doubt on the adequacy of the people, institutions and practices that are supposed to either prevent such destructive impacts from happening or mitigate the impact if they do hit.

We define 'crises' as episodic breakdowns of familiar symbolic frameworks that legitimate the pre-existing sociopolitical order ('t Hart 1993). In an anthropological sense, crises can be conceived of as bundles of real and present dangers, ills or evils that defy widely held beliefs that such things must not and cannot happen 'here'. Crises are by definition extraordinary in kind and/or scope, testing the resilience of a society and exposing the shortcomings of its leaders and public institutions (Drennan and McConnell 2007).

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When a crisis pervades a community, it creates a relentless array of challenges for citizens and rulers alike. In this volume, we concentrate on the latter. Faced with a crisis, politicians and public officials have to deal with the immediate threat or damage inflicted, but they also have to come to terms with the vulnerabilities revealed and the public disaffection this may evoke. A list of recent crises – think of the 9/11 attacks, the Madrid and London bombings, the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina – suggests how hard it can be to meet these challenges. Hitherto undiscovered or neglected drawbacks of existing institutions, policies and practices sometimes become painfully obvious. As a consequence, leaders and officials at all levels of government often struggle to cope.

Crises tend to cast long shadows on the polities in which they occur. Public officeholders face pressures from the media, the public, legislatures and sometimes the courts to recount how a crisis could have occurred, to account for their response, and to explain how they propose to deal with its impact. When the crisis in question is widely held to have been unforeseeable and uncontrollable, the amount of explaining and excusing they have to do is relatively limited. But when there is a widespread perception that the threat could have been foreseen and possibly avoided altogether, or that the official response after its occurrence was substandard, political leaders and officials may end up in troubled waters.

Indeed, many political leaders have seen their careers damaged if not terminated in the face of perceived failures in crisis management. Among twentieth-century UK prime ministers alone, Chamberlain, Eden and Callaghan all saw their periods in office cut short in the wake of crises they were alleged to have mismanaged. Yet crises may give birth to heroes as well as villains among public policy makers. The public reputations or political careers of some leaders have been bolstered by handling a crisis successfully (New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani after 9/11 being the most noteworthy recent example) or deftly creating and politically exploiting one. An example of the latter is Australian Prime Minister John Howard's use of the 'children overboard crisis' during the 2001 Australian election campaign. It involved allegations by the PM and his advisors that asylum seekers headed for Australia had thrown their children from a vessel into the sea in order to force a rescue of the children and their parents. Howard's vilification of these individuals and the creation of a sense of crisis paved the way for his

Liberal Party's election victory and a tougher immigration policy (Marr and Wilkinson 2004).

The effects of crises on public policies and institutions display the same kind of variation. The events of 9/11 exacted a tragic human toll from the New York police and fire departments, but at the same time the many tales of selfless sacrifice and bravery spilled over into a strongly enhanced reputation of both agencies. By contrast, the CIA and other intelligence agencies were quickly criticised for not cooperating effectively in preventing the attacks. Some crises are followed – quite naturally it seems – by investigations and promises of reform aimed at improving policies and institutions that have proven vulnerable under pressure. The 9/11 attacks resulted in an overhaul of the U.S. intelligence sector and created a major ripple effect in security policy throughout most of the western world, which continues to this very day. Yet, as we shall see in this volume, the opposite may also occur: some crises are absorbed politically without major policy changes or reorganisations. Such cases merely confirm what many students of public administration and political science take as conventional wisdom: given the deep institutionalisation of rules, practices, budgets and communities of stakeholders, it is often extremely hard to change established policies and institutions radically – even if they fail miserably (cf. Lindblom 1959; Rose and Davies 1994; Wilsford 2001; Kuipers 2006).

How can these differences in outcome be explained? This volume inquires into precisely this issue and examines the political fates of public leaders, policies and institutions in the wake of crises. The main puzzle that occupies all its authors is that some crises have marked political consequences and trigger major policy or institutional changes, whereas others bolster the precrisis status quo. To explore these issues, the chapters in this book offer in-depth examinations of 'crisis politics' in a number of recent cases. In these cases, the political dimension of crisis management is present from the outset, but it continues to affect leaders, policies and institutions well after the operational phases of crisis management have ended.

Background and aims

Crises have been the subject of considerable academic study. Once a disjointed, segmented set of niches within the social sciences, such

writings have expanded in volume and gained in coherence follow-
ing major funding boosts in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.[1] By and
large, comparative research has taught us how different types of crises
incubate and escalate. It has identified the challenges they pose to gov-
ernments and citizens and described how political-administrative elites
respond to them.

The bulk of this research focuses on the managerial dimension of
coping with crises: prevention and preparedness measures, critical deci-
sion making during emergency response operations, coordination of
operational services, communication with the general public, and deal-
ing with the mass media. It tends to concentrate on the functional chal-
lenges of adapting public organisations and networks to the extreme
conditions that major emergencies impose. It has resulted in policy
principles for risk assessment and contingency planning as well as in
experiential rules and guidelines for designing and running command
centres, fostering interorganisational collaboration, informing the pub-
lic, and managing media relations.[2]

In contrast, the more strategic, political dimension of crisis manage-
ment has received much less attention. Insofar as crisis studies deal
with the broader political ramifications of crises, they tend to concen-
trate on the intergovernmental and interorganisational conflicts that
often emerge in the course of large-scale, high-speed, high-stakes crisis
response operations (Rosenthal et al. 1991; Schneider 1995). Much less
research effort has been devoted in the crisis management literature to
the wider impact of crises on political officeholders, governments and
their policies (cf. Birkland 1997, 2004, 2006; Kurtz 2004).[3]

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[1] A wide variety of sources exists. For a first overview of the subject, we
recommend Brecher (1993); Rosenthal et al. (1989; 2001); George (1993);
Farazmand (2001); Seeger et al. (2003); Boin et al. (2005) and Rodriguez et al.
(2006).
[2] Most of the 'how to manage a crisis' texts are not specifically oriented to the
public sector. They tend to be focused either on the private sector or are
cross-sectoral. Examples include Coombs (1999); Fink (2002); Regester and
Larkin (2002) and Curtin et al. (2005).
[3] Important exceptions include the social-psychological literature on collective
trauma and posttraumatic stress; the sociological and development studies
literatures on postdisaster reconstruction of stricken communities; urban
planning literature on disaster recovery; and the emerging international relations
literature on conflict termination and the implementation of peace agreements.
Useful sources include Herman (1997); Pyszczynski et al. (2002); Fortna (2004);
Wirth (2004); Neal (2005); Tumarkin (2005) and Vale and Campanella (2005).

This volume aims to redress this omission. It brings together a set of recent, high-profile crisis cases that in various ways directly challenged existing public policies and institutions as well as the careers of the politicians and public managers in charge of them. Each case chapter presents a particular analytical perspective on various aspects of the larger puzzle of crisis politics and probes its plausibility in applying it to the case(s) studied. Compared and synthesised in the final chapter, these various perspectives offer the beginnings of an analytical toolkit that may be used to understand the (differential) nature and impact of the politics of crisis management.

In pursuing these aims, this introductory chapter opens up the 'black box' of crisis politics. We do so by focusing on crisis-induced processes of accountability and learning. When public officeholders have to explain their actions and look toward the future in dialogue with public forums that have the capacity to significantly affect their own fortunes, they cannot help but confront, and try to shape, the political impact of a crisis. Their efforts in these venues are constrained by stakeholders and opposition forces who seek support for their definition of the causes of crisis as well as their judgements on the effectiveness of the crisis response. It is in these forums that the politics of crisis plays out in full force, determining to a considerable degree the future of leaders, policies and institutions.

We proceed in this introductory chapter as follows. First, we discuss the distinct challenges that crises pose to political – administrative elites, public policies and institutions. We then explore the characteristics of crisis-induced accountability and learning processes, particularly their permeation by investigating, politicking, blaming and manoeuvering. We also identify a range of crisis outcomes with regard to the fates of political leaders, public policies and public institutions. Third, we identify a number of situational and contextual factors that, theory suggests, shape the course and outcomes of these crisis-induced processes. We end this chapter with a brief introduction to the case study chapters and an explanation of our selection of these cases.

Crisis-induced governance challenges

When we study societal responses to crises, we must differentiate between two levels of analysis. At the *operational level*, we find the people who directly experience and respond to a critical contingency:

emergency operators, middle-level public officials, expert advisers, victims and volunteers. At the *strategic level*, we find political and administrative officeholders (both inside and outside the 'core executive') who are expected to concentrate on the larger institutional, political and social ramifications of the crisis. This level also includes people and forums who are permanently engaged in critically scrutinising and influencing elite behaviour: parliamentarians, watchdog agencies, journalists and interest/lobby groups. The focus in this volume lies exclusively on the latter.

When they are confronted with crisis, public leaders and agencies face three distinct challenges. First, there is the actual emergency response: this has to come quickly, effectively and with due consideration for the often extremely complicated logistical, institutional and psychosocial conditions that prevail. This dimension of crisis management has received the bulk of the attention in the disaster and emergency management literatures, so we shall not discuss it any further (see e.g. Rosenthal et al. 1989, 2001; Rodríguez et al. 2006).

Second, in today's age of high-speed and global mass communication, a crisis necessitates immediate and comprehensive public information and communication activities. Simply put: governments need to tell people what is going on, what might happen next and what it means to them. Failure to do so in a timely and authoritative fashion opens up a Pandora's box of journalistic and web-based speculation, rumour, suspicion and allegations that can easily inflame public opinion and sour the political climate, even as emergency operations are still under way. Several case studies in this volume demonstrate how governments may lose – and other political stakeholders may gain – control of the 'definition of the situation'.

Third, perhaps the most daunting strategic challenges for public policy makers occur well after the immediate response operations have dwindled or settled into orderly patterns.[4] In the weeks and months (and occasionally even years) after the operational crisis response has subsided, public leaders may find themselves still preoccupied with managing the 'fallout' of the crisis: searching for resources to pay for damages, fighting judicial battles, coping with the onslaught of

[4] For an early statement, see Rosenthal et al. (1994). For further explorations, consult 't Hart and Boin (2001).

criticism that it has evoked, but also exploiting the possibilities a crisis offers. Several case studies in this volume focus on this third set of crisis-induced governance challenges.

Crises and politics

Crises have a way of becoming politicised rather quickly. Some actors perceive a threat to their ways of working, policies and legitimacy, yet others relish the prospect of change. Political, bureaucratic, economic and other special interests do not automatically pull together and give up their self-interest just because a crisis has occurred. They engage in a struggle to produce a dominant interpretation of the implications of the crisis. The sheer intensity of these struggles tends to produce unpredictable twists and turns in the crisis-induced fates of politicians, policies and institutions alike.

As stated, this politicisation tends to evolve around two core processes. One is accountability. This relates to officeholders rendering account (in public forums) of their actions prior to and following a crisis. Where these accounts are debated, judgement is passed and possible sanctions administered (Bovens 2007). The other is learning, defined here as the evaluation and redesigning of institutions, policies and practices with a view to improving their future fungibility (Rose and Davies 1994).

Accountability is mainly about looking back and judging the performance of people; lesson drawing is more about looking forward and improving the performance of structures and arrangements. Even though learning is thus logically distinct from accountability, they may overlap in political practice. Accountability forums such as parliaments often take an explicit interest in drawing lessons for the future.

The arenas in which accountability and learning play out offer stakeholders a wide variety of opportunities to gain support for their definition of the crisis (and their envisioned solutions). The dynamics of interactions in (and between) these venues determine to a large extent the fates of leaders, public policies and public institutions.

Accountability and learning are often, if only implicitly, viewed as mechanisms for social catharsis. In liberal societies based on principles of openness and democratic control of executive power, the practices and discourses of crisis-induced scrutiny and questioning are seen as a

crucial part of a recovery and healing process. Although this is some-
times clearly the case, many crises nevertheless linger on for years –
only to erupt once again in different guises.

Catharsis can thus prove elusive. The process of looking forward is
hindered because the process of looking back turns out to be inconclu-
sive and contested. This can happen in a variety of ways. The media
may sense that there is more to the story than has come out so far and
thus continue to dig around for new revelations. Official investigations
may extend the time frame, leading to protracted political uncertainty
and sometimes breeding further investigations. Also, political stale-
mates and bloodletting may prompt an atmosphere of enduring bitter-
ness, while victims and other stakeholders may go public (or go to the
courts) with allegations of government negligence or wrongdoing.

Crises do have dynamic potential to prompt change. By destabilising
the veracity and legitimacy of existing policies, goals and institutions
as well as threatening the security and rewards obtained by relevant
actors and stakeholders, they provide 'windows of opportunity' for
reform (Birkland 1997; Kingdon 2003). Crisis-induced reforms may
be a matter of intelligent reflection and experimentation resulting from
the embracing of new ideas. However, things can be much more pro-
saic. Change may be the product of sheer political necessity: embattled
policy makers under critical scrutiny after an extreme event forced to
make symbolic gestures. Likewise, policy change may occur when crises
prompt a shift in the balance of power between various coalitions of
stakeholders who are engaged in ongoing struggles about particular
policies and programs (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993).

Crisis does not produce politics in a linear fashion. In particular,
processes of accountability and learning do not automatically produce
societal and political consensus on the evaluation of the past or the
way forward. In crisis politics, we tend to find a spectrum of stances
and responses. At one end, there are those who categorically advocate
a change of leaders and policies. At the other end, we find leaders and
their supporters determined to ride out the storm as well as staunch
supporters of existing policies and institutions. Therefore an initial
consensus on the need for accountability and learning in the wake of
crisis is easily fractured by argument and debate over the specific forms
that accountability and learning processes should take.

In order to pave the way for the case studies in this book, we
now introduce the concepts of accountability and learning processes

in somewhat greater detail. We will not attempt here to provide a definitive account of the complexities and contradictions of crisis and postcrisis periods. Rather, we try to identify aspects of crisis-induced accountability and lesson-drawing processes that appear to affect in a significant manner the outcomes of a crisis.

Crisis-induced accountability: leaders and blame games

The concept of public accountability is subject to considerable debate about 'ideals' of public accountability and how accountability regimes operate in practice (Mulgan 2003). In liberal democracies, accountability regimes are designed to make political decision makers answerable for their actions to public forums. These forums possess certain powers – formal and informal – to interrogate, debate with and sanction political decision makers.[5] In the emotionally charged context of crisis-induced turmoil and grief, accountability is rarely a routine, ritualistic exercise, as it sometimes is for governments that enjoy stable majorities in otherwise peaceful and prosperous democracies. Typical accountability questions in crisis-induced politics include: What happened? Who and what caused this to happen? Who is responsible? Who should be sanctioned?

Such questions and the search for answers are typically played out through an array of official inquiries, investigative journalism, political 'dirt' digging, parliamentary questions, legal investigations, victim and family campaigns, as well as lobby group interventions. Scrutiny often calls into question long-standing policies, the working of public institutions and the performance of political and bureaucratic leaders.

We picture crisis-induced accountability processes as arenas in which politicians and stakeholders struggle over causes and blame ('t Hart 1993; Boin et al. 2005). The right to question, criticise and seek responses is part of the fabric of pluralistic, liberal democratic regimes. In this context, it is almost naïve to expect some kind of societal synergy amidst crisis-induced accountability processes. Given their positions, interests and ideas, all actors involved in accountability processes will use a variety of strategies to argue their case and apportion blame. We refer to this particular and rather pervasive characteristic in terms of the 'blame game' (Brändström and Kuipers 2003).

[5] These forums include parliaments, auditors, courts and mass media.