



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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Boin, R.A.; Hart, P. ' t

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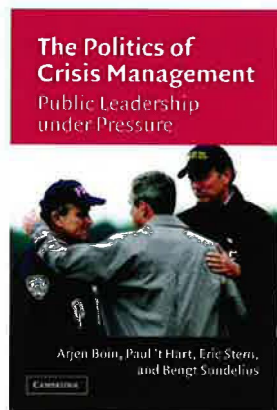
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The unintended consequences of crisis exploitation

Professors Arjen Boin (Louisiana State University) and Paul 't Hart (Australian National University and Utrecht University) are co-authors of the prize winning study *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure* (Cambridge University Press 2005). In this article they discuss the risks of using crisis for political purposes.

Prof. dr. Arjen Boin en prof. dr. Paul 't Hart



shuttle accident – will confirm just how prevalent (and pathological) these factors are.

It is not all bad news. Research consistently shows that crises typically create major opportunities for change. The very occurrence of a crisis or disaster signals that existing policies and institutions failed to protect a society against external or internal threats. Adaptation then seems necessary: crises invite leaders to act and get things done. They open political windows of opportunity for new ideas and policies, for a new way of working. A society – its institutions, policies and citizens – can thus emerge stronger from a traumatizing experience.

“It is not all bad news”

The really big and scary crises offer unique opportunities for political exploitation. When a crisis has a truly dislocating effect – de-legitimizing entire institutions or rendering obsolete long-standing policies – leaders can redesign and rebuild the institutional landscape. Changes that would be politically impossible in normal times are suddenly required and expected.

Political leaders then face an intriguing set of challenges. They must first of all make sure that they themselves and the governments or organizations they lead come to be seen as part of the solution, not as part of the problems that caused the crisis in the first place. This requires astute management of the accountability process – now commonly known as the ‘blame game’ – that crises trigger. They must also act prudently to reconsider and adjust existing policies and institutions to the new realities – including altered public perceptions and strong public emotions – that crises create. And finally, to the extent that they want to exploit the opportunities for ‘creative destruction’ that crises offer, they need

We live in challenging times. Governments around the world are wrestling with long-term impacts of the worst financial-economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The “War on Terror” rages on, claiming victims every day. New threats such as cyber terrorism and climate change have appeared on the horizon. Natural disasters strike suddenly and wreak havoc.

Crisis and disaster management is a core responsibility of the nation state. Public administration scholars routinely describe and decry the “hollowing out of the state”. They point out the declining legitimacy of “big government”. But when a crisis hits, people turn to the state for direction and assistance. This combination of declining capacity and rising expectations in times of crisis creates serious challenges for political-administrative elites.

Crisis research has unearthed a range of pathological factors that undermine the performance of political-administrative leaders. In their efforts to manage the impact of adversity, they encounter bureaucratic, psychological and communicative barriers. A quick reading of investigative reports into major disasters – think of the Amsterdam air disaster, Srebrenica, the Enschede fireworks factory explosion, and the Columbia

to infuse the crisis-induced discussions about ‘never again’ and ‘learning the lessons’ with the political agenda they brought into office, since “you never want a serious crisis to go to waste” (Rahm Emanuel, President Obama’s chief of staff, January 2009).

“You never want a serious crisis to go to waste”

Some leaders are particularly adept at crisis exploitation. Franklin Roosevelt, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were all masters of this craft. On the wings of recession, they transformed economic policy and the role of the state. Consistently forwarding a distinct philosophy of change, they emerged from these long crisis periods as true statesmen.

Some leaders savour the prospect of change so deeply they will seek to create a sense of urgency, calculating that a deep crisis will temporarily relieve the many constraints of ‘government as usual.’ Political scientist Murray Edelman observed decades ago that ‘Any government that prides itself on its ability to manage crises is sure to find crises to manage, and crisis management is always available as a way to mobilize public support.’

In his efforts to get a stimulus bill passed, President Obama upped the crisis rhetoric to sustain momentum. If senators do not act immediately, the President warned, the current crisis could turn into a catastrophe. Every day of political bickering will cost more jobs, more foreclosures, and more sorrow. A political contest of ideas and interests was thus framed as a moral imperative – just like George W Bush did after 9/11. In both instances, the political space for constructive opposition to the leader’s agenda was effectively and severely constrained. Like the Patriot Act, the stimulus package sailed through Congress, both initiating fundamental, hard-to-reverse reforms conceived and implemented at a pace that would astound even Roosevelt.

In another example of crisis exploitation, Australia’s Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was quick to publish a major essay that declared the ‘neo-liberalism’ of his main political adversaries dead and buried. To him, the global crisis means that the nation state and social democracy are back in business. Almost three decades after Reagan uttered his famous line that government

is not the solution but the problem, the tables can be turned, says Rudd: the market has problems, government brings the solution. He received robust criticism for taking this line, but got what he wanted: control of the agenda of the debate, moving attention away from the big gambles taken by his government in cobbling together a 46 billion dollar stimulus package.

Crisis exploitation is politically tempting, but may compromise prudence in policymaking and stifle democratic deliberation. In their rush to seize the political momentum, these leaders are ignoring an essential lesson of past crises: quick and big crisis responses tend to backfire. Crisis-induced reforms often produce reform-induced crises. Reforms crafted in haste address symptoms rather than causes, focus on the short term rather than the longer term, and rarely capture the wisdom of those who know best (those who have to deliver it).

“Crisis-induced reforms often produce reform-induced crises”

Only one year after the Obama administration passed the stimulus bill, the negatives have begun to outweigh the positives. Pundits have conveniently forgotten how the adoption of the stimulus bill stopped a spiraling downfall of the world’s largest economy. The President is increasingly being associated with “big spending” and “bailing out Wall Street” – a decidedly negative story line is defining his administration.

Capitalizing on crisis unleashes a momentum that is hard to control. More specifically, a crisis triggers two dangerous reflexes that ultimately undermine the chances of the proposed reform.

First, in the rush to seize the momentum crisis leaders tend to impose self-defeating deadlines. Sober analysis and calm reflection are crowded out by partisan considerations. Doctrinaire beliefs and political spin take over, and uncertainty, doubt and dissent are no longer welcome, not even behind closed doors. Many crisis leaders tend to rely exclusively on inner circles of trusted and liked advisers in which internal consensus becomes a prized asset to be defended at all costs. The policies that result from this self-created pressure cooker rarely stand the test of time. A second crisis reflex is to cut off debate. Leaders arm-twist legislators to rubber stamp what are in effect huge

policy gambles. Those who publicly doubt these gambles are accused of politicking and discounted as apologists for “old” remedies that have been shown wrong. We have been here before when the Bush administration branded opponents of hastily crafted post-9/11 reforms as “unpatriotic”.

“Crisis research warns against the temptation to play the crisis exploitation game”

The efforts to reform the US health care system provide a case in point. Seeking to convert political momentum and portraying the current healthcare situation in stark terms, the Obama administration and Democratic Congressmen paid little heed to Republican concerns. Rahm Emanuel’s crisis dictum (cited above) galvanized the Republican opposition against the healthcare reform initiative. When the Democrats lost their filibuster-proof majority (Ted Kennedy’s seat went to a Republican contender), the Republicans interpreted this as an endorsement of their opposition. Crisis rhetoric from both sides has cut a deep divide in American politics.

Crisis research warns against the temptation to play the crisis exploitation game. The unprompted use of crisis rhetoric gives rise to the fundamental error of over-promising, which quickly ends up in under-delivering. Imposing hasty crisis measures negates the intelligence

of democracy: the exploring and reconsidering, bargaining and learning produced by pluralistic deliberation. The bigger the problems, the more leaders should resist the temptations of using crises to prioritize personal agendas.

When the problems are as big, baffling, and unprecedented as they are today, a different style of crisis leadership is required. Instead of advocating quick fixes and playing the blame game, leaders should use their authority to mobilize adaptive capacity within their societies. Citizens need to be actively involved in the process of rethinking the values, assumptions and institutions that underlie a way of life that now appears unsustainable. They need to “buy into change” if that change is to succeed.

“It takes wisdom and courage to resist the temptation of crisis exploitation”

It takes wisdom and courage to resist the temptation of crisis exploitation. True statesmen recognize the necessity of adaptation and use their political intuition to determine the shape, speed and direction of reform. They make sure the proposed adaptation fits the core values of the society that is to bear the brunt of reform. And they do not sacrifice democratic deliberation on the altar of crisis-induced executive dominance. ■

Suggestions for further reading

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‘Blijf alert en waakzaam voor veranderingen’

Prof. dr. Uri Rosenthal is voorzitter van het COT Instituut voor Veiligheids- en Crisismanagement en hoogleraar Bestuurskunde aan de Universiteit Leiden. Wij vroegen hem naar zijn kijk op de gebeurtenissen rond de rellen in Hoek van Holland.

door Lisa Blanken en Sander Harmes



In hoeverre denkt u dat een organisatie grip kan hebben op een situatie als Hoek van Holland?

Je hebt te maken met voetbalhooligans die geleidelijk hebben geconstateerd dat er in het stadion weinig eer voor hen te behalen valt, waardoor de toestanden zich hebben verplaatst. Gaandeweg is er een ontwikkeling op gang gekomen waarbij hooligans evenementen verstoren. Al langer speelt het probleem dat jongeren en ook oudere jongeren zich te buiten gaan aan het excessief gebruik van drugs en alcohol, in het bijzonder een combinatie hiervan. Hierdoor worden ze onbeheerst en daardoor moeilijk beheersbaar voor degene die met ze te maken krijgt.

Welke van de in het rapport genoemde hoofdconclusies vindt u het meest verwijtbaar?

Ik praat niet in termen van verwijtbaarheid. In het rapport doen we constatering over dingen die niet goed zijn gelopen. Dit moet je kunnen afleiden uit een normenkader waaraan je behoort te voldoen vanuit wet- en regelgeving en vanuit een organisatie. Van daaruit kun je kijken naar de hoofdconclusies en er je oordeel aan verbinden. Wat in deze zaak wel heel duidelijk naar voren is gekomen, is dat het evenement in de verkeerde risicocategorie is geplaatst. Met alle gevolgen van dien. Dit is een technisch verhaal, maar het gaat om gradaties van risico die gekoppeld worden aan een evenement. Dit risicogehalte wordt onderscheiden in low risk, medium risk en high risk. Wanneer het gaat om een lowriskactiviteit is het in Rotterdam de gewoonte om het weg te zetten bij politiemensen die op de plek zelf werken. Op het moment dat het medium risk is, wordt er een Districtelijk Grootchalig Bijzonder Optreden tegenaan gezet. Wanneer een evenement high risk is wordt het in een Grootchalig Bijzonder Optreden (DGBO) ondergebracht. Dancefestival Veronica Sunset Grooves werd als lowriskactiviteit weggezet bij plaatselijke politiemensen en dat was een gedeelte van het probleem in Hoek van Holland.

In Rotterdam zijn er meer dan 1700 evenementen per jaar. Is dat misschien te veel?

Van die 1700 evenementen zitten er een groot aantal zonder meer in de lowriskcategorie. Wij hebben Rotterdam aanbevolen het evenementenbeleid in het algemeen en de evenementenkalender in het bijzonder door te lichten. De gemeente moet vervolgens bepalen welke inzet per jaar geleverd kan worden. Op basis van het onderzoek is gebleken dat het aantal high- en mediumrisicoevenementen

Op 22 augustus 2009 liep het dancefestival Veronica Sunset Grooves in Hoek van Holland volledig uit de hand. De aanwezige politiemensen werden door hooligans aangevallen en zij voelden zich genoodzaakt schoten te lossen. Hierbij kwam één man om het leven. Het COT deed in samenwerking met Bureau Beke onderzoek naar de oorzaken van de rellen in Hoek van Holland en de bevindingen werden gepresenteerd in een rapport¹. Hierin wordt in de eerste plaats de nadruk gelegd op de rol van de relschoppers, die zich buitengewoon gewelddadig hebben gedragen. De politiemensen hebben gehandeld vanuit een uitzonderlijke en levensbedreigende situatie, zonder dat zij op ondersteuning konden rekenen. Verder wordt gesteld dat er gebrek aan scherpte en alertheid was bij de organisaties en autoriteiten. Bovendien waren er voor het evenement signalen die wezen op mogelijke ongeregelheden, maar deze werden niet onderkend. Het rapport concludeert tot slot dat de informatievoorziening tussen burgemeester, hoofdofficier van justitie en korpsleiding onvoldoende was.