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18

Confront or Concede?**Blame Games as a Test of Cultural Bias in Different Political Systems***Minou de Ruiter and Sanneke Kuipers***1 Introduction**

A political drama is often guaranteed when public or political officeholders are caught up in alleged policy failures or personal scandals.¹ However, seemingly similar cases often lead to different outcomes in terms of blaming and political sanctions. To attribute or avoid blame, actors actively construct or resist narratives of harm, responsibility, and appropriate punishment. After all, blame combines perceived severity and harm with perceived responsibility of an individual or an organization for that harm at any given point in time (Iyengar 1989). What is considered a blameworthy event, who carries responsibility, and what is appropriate punishment is essentially socially constructed. Within-system comparisons teach us that actors' blame-game behaviour affects the ultimate attribution of blame (Hinterleitner 2020; Hood 2011).

Empirical studies in Westminster settings show that actors demonstrate patterned behaviour—the so-called 'staged retreat'—in response to accusations: consecutively denying severity, responsibility, and punishment in relation to a blameworthy event (Hood 2011; Hood et al. 2009, 2016). The logic of staged retreat implies that executives will first attempt to reframe or deny problems, and, only if defensive options fail, gradually accept more responsibility and consequences. Despite indications that institutional settings matter, Hood (2011) suggests universality of these observations: 'if blame avoidance means anything, it will tend to mean that the sequencing approach will be commonly observable' (155).

¹ This chapter is based on a sub-study in the dissertation of one of the authors, which can be found in full in De Ruiter (2019).

Meanwhile, responses to failure in public management ‘are likely to be the key test of cultural bias’ (Hood 1998, 25). An open question is thus whether ‘what gets you off the hook of blame from one cultural starting-point may only dig you into a deeper accountability hole in another setting’ (Hood 2014, 614). Institutional settings and their informal and formal rules on accountability tend to affect blame attribution after scandals or during crises (De Ruiter and Kuipers 2021; Hinterleitner 2020). Different institutional settings influence blame-avoidance behaviour, leading to different blame outcomes for highly similar failures or offences.

However, as Hinterleitner (2017, 2020) pointed out multiple times, cross-institutional and cross-cultural empirical research on blame avoidance is remarkably sparse. After all, no two events are the same and international comparison is extremely difficult when the context differs in multiple ways.

Case studies in consociational systems, for instance, suggest that blame games do not demonstrate an ideal-typical staged retreat but run a slightly different course (Bach and Wegrich 2019; Resodihardjo et al. 2016). It may come as no surprise that consociational systems favour consensus-orientated accountability debates over more confrontational styles. Yet accommodative blame-avoidance behaviour is far from self-evident in consensual democracies. Hinterleitner (2020, 139) concludes from his comparative case research that the ‘UK blame game style is characterized by rather unaggressive and routinized interactions between government and opponents’ as opposed to the rather aggressive, incumbent-centred blame games in Germany. This would suggest that defensive, staged retreat dynamics might be prevalent in consociational systems as well. However, due to the vast variety of blameworthy events, scarcity of cross-national comparative research, and dominance of studies in majoritarian Westminster democracies, insights into the influence of institutions on blame-avoidance behaviour and its consequences are often assumed and fragmentary.

What is lacking is a comparative study on how actors in different institutional contexts such as majoritarian (Westminster) and coalition-governed (consociational) systems avoid blame in reaction to similar cases. An elite interview study using qualitative vignettes in two different institutional settings can reveal behavioural expectations in relation to a set of the same blameworthy events. Such a study not only tests the staged retreat assumption but also provides insights in alternative interaction patterns. It provides insights into strategies with regards to each of the discursive stages and into important differences and similarities between actors in different polities in staging their performance, scripting their tactics, and telling their stories.

468 The Politics and Governance of Blame

This chapter asks whether staged retreat hypotheses—routinely accepted in the blaming and accountability literature—apply in similar ways in different political systems. This chapter compares blame-avoidance expectations by elite actors in sixty-two vignette interviews held across two opposite parliamentary systems: the Netherlands and the Australian State of New South Wales (NSW). While both parliamentary systems have similar ministerial responsibility conventions, in NSW a majoritarian—winner-takes-all—form of politics prevails as opposed to the Dutch setting where consensual behaviour is more prevalent (Lijphart 2012, 36). The aim of the comparison is to identify and explain patterns in blame-avoidance behaviour of political executives and their critics, as well as their efficacy and appropriateness, across these two opposite institutional settings.

Overall, the study finds that the staged retreat only dominates in the majoritarian setting and that key actors in consensual systems have different expectations and implicit norms on blame-avoidance behaviour. Specifically, Dutch political executives are bound more strongly than their NSW counterparts by formal institutional rules and informal rules-in-use regarding political accountability, constraining their ability to effectively deny the severity and responsibility in blameworthy incidents. At the same time, across both settings, actors agree that effective blame-avoiding behaviour requires bolstering by dramaturgical acts, such as staging a performance, performing proper speech acts, and telling a compelling story about the incident.

2 The Staged Retreat in Various Institutional Settings

Blame-avoidance behaviour is often broadly defined as ‘all kinds of activities [by actors] intended to downplay or distance oneself from (potentially) blame-attracting and goal-threatening events’ (Hinterleitner 2017, 243). Blame games often move through three stages: discussions about the harm caused by the incident, responsibility for the incident, and the political and institutional consequences. In each stage, the minister can choose between a confrontational and an accommodative stance. Hood and others posed that political officeholders in majoritarian systems use a ‘staged retreat’, in which they start with confrontational tactics and only gradually accept more blame for the occurrence and responsibility for the outcomes of the event (Hood et al. 2009).

In the blame-avoidance literature, the rhetorical content of strategies dominates. However, Hearit (2006, 205) asserts that blame avoidance need to be ‘enacted’ in ‘a compelling performance, one that follows an acceptable public script and meet public expectations for an acceptable drama.’ It is therefore

also important to assess expectations about dramaturgical elements of blame-avoidance behaviour; that is, not only what political executives say but where and how they say it.

To compare expectations of blame-avoidance behaviour across institutional settings, this chapter applies March and Olsen's long-standing thesis that political institutions constitute both formal rules (rules-in form) and informal practices (rules-in-use). The latter can be described as 'shared meanings and practices that come to be taken as given over a long period of time' (March and Olsen 1996, 249).

Rules-in-use can follow a 'logic of consequences' (how to avoid blame) or a 'logic of appropriateness' (how to be a responsible minister) (March and Olsen 1996). According to March and Olsen (2011, 490) 'political actors are likely to be held accountable for both the appropriateness and the consequences of their actions'. Consequences and appropriateness do not always align, as 'proper behaviour sometimes is associated with bad consequences and improper behaviour sometimes is associated with good consequences' (March and Olsen 2011, 490). Institutional settings may help to explain how and why one logic can dominate the other (March and Olsen, 2011, 493).

Classic studies on majoritarian versus consensual parliamentary democracies (Lijphart 1999, 2012) showcase how formal and informal institutions interact. As majoritarian two-party systems concentrate executive power in single-party majority cabinets, parliamentarians, and Opposition parties have less opportunity to politicize blameworthy incidents and hold the minister to account in parliament. As a result, a winner-takes-all form of politics prevails in majoritarian systems (Lijphart 1999). Meanwhile, consensual multi-party systems distribute executive power in multi-party coalition cabinets, leading to more 'genuine give-and-take relationships between government and parliament' and providing parliamentarians a stronger role in blameworthy incidents (Lijphart 2012, 36). As a result, political elites in consensual systems 'consider consultation more appropriate than antagonistic behavior' (Beyers, Vollaard, and Dumont 2014, 10; Lijphart 2012, 274–275). Actors in consensual systems could thus have different ideas of what are competent and/or appropriate ways of interacting during blameworthy incidents than actors in majority systems.

3 Method and Research Design

To probe into what blame-avoidance behaviour key actors from different institutional settings expect in response to similar cases, this study uses 'qualitative vignettes' in elite interviews in two opposite parliamentary systems.

470 The Politics and Governance of Blame

Systematic comparison of two opposite parliamentary systems can reveal different rules of the game, both formally and informally, concerning blame-avoiding behaviour and how this plays out in blameworthy incidents.

This chapter compares two established parliamentary systems with similar constitutional rules for ministerial responsibility: the Netherlands and the Australian State of NSW (Blunt 2004; Visser 2008). In both systems, parliament can sanction ministers who failed in the execution of their ministerial responsibilities, with the use of a vote of no confidence or censure directed at an individual minister. In fact, both political systems produce remarkably similar resignation and survival rates, with the Netherlands accounting for more forced resignations (5.9 per cent or forty-four in total) than NSW (4.2 per cent or twenty-eight) between 1946 and 2017 (De Ruiter 2019, 107).

However, the Netherlands and NSW are opposites on the majoritarian-consensual democracy scale of Lijphart (1999, 2012), with the Netherlands exemplifying a consensual system and NSW a majoritarian political system. In Australian politics, NSW is notorious for its robustly combative, ‘confrontational style of debate’ (Hesford 2007, 137). In contrast, Dutch politics is known for its consociational practices, where party elites cooperate across party boundaries, both within and outside parliament (Beyers et al. 2014, 9).

While as a State, the NSW government carries no responsibility for matters such as defence and foreign policy, the comparison between both system is appropriate to understand the process and outcome of blame processes as the Australian States play a critical role in the ‘formation, execution and administration of public policy’ (Moon and Sharman 2003, 5). Therefore, we would expect that many policy failures in these policy domains occur at State level and that subsequently Dutch and NSW executives can be confronted with largely similar policy failures. The vignettes are fictive case examples that could equally well occur in both the NSW and the Dutch political arenas. In the words of Ragin (2013, 17), we argue that the selected political systems, though at a different governance level, are sufficiently comparable and that their similarities and differences are ‘meaningful for the questions asked’.

In total, sixty-two qualitative vignette interviews were held with an equal number of respondents for the Netherlands and NSW in 2014 and 2015 (see Table 18.1 for interviewee background). All sixty-two interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours and included both semi-structured questions and two or three qualitative vignettes. According to Bloor and Wood (2006, 183), qualitative vignettes are:

A technique used in structured and depth interviews . . . providing sketches of fictional (or fictionalized) scenarios. The respondent is then invited to imagine,

Table 18.1 Interviewee background

	The Netherlands	New South Wales
<i>Journalists</i>	9	6
<i>Parliamentarians</i>	7	5
<i>Former ministers (some junior)</i>	7	8
<i>Top civil servants + political staff</i>	8	12 (of which 6 political staff)
<i>Total:</i>	31	31

Source: created by authors using data from De Ruiter (2019, 70).

drawing on his or her own experience, how the central character in the scenario will (and should) behave. Vignettes thus collect situated data on group values, group beliefs and group norms of behaviour.

Qualitative vignettes enable researchers to explore interviewees' perceptions of dilemmas, revealing the constructed and contingent nature of blame avoidance and helping identify informal rules-in-use (Wilks 2004). In addition, the vignettes (stylized blameworthy incidents) ensure that respondents reflect on the same case and allow the researcher to qualitatively code and compare their responses across roles and systems. Third, the use of qualitative vignettes can be an advantageous tool to focus and navigate interviews with elite actors on politically sensitive topics (Barter and Renold 1999). For some interviewees, such as departmental heads, the ostensibly hypothetical nature of the vignettes provides them with leeway to share valuable information about their views on sensitive political processes.

As a result, this innovative approach allows us to find out what key actors—parliamentarians, journalists, civil servants, and former ministers—in two opposing political systems employ as informal rules-in-use for blame-avoidance behaviour.

We used three vignettes, based on historical cases (both Dutch and NSW examples), varying between resignation issues that relate to a minister's portfolio and issues that relate to personal conduct (Fischer et al. 2006):

Vignette 1: Personal scandal (third-party gift and third-party trip)

Vignette 2: Policy failure without personal involvement minister (prison murder due to departmental error)

Vignette 3: Policy failure with possible personal error minister within a public network setting (failed insulation programme/public transport failure)

Vignette 1 is provided below as an example.

472 The Politics and Governance of Blame

The *Daily Telegraph* reveals some state ministers have very close ties to the big industrial corporations. Especially the minister for resources and energy and the minister for transport and infrastructure are criticized in the article. The minister for resources and energy would have flown to a prestigious tennis tournament in the private jet of an important energy supplier. A big infrastructure company has sent the minister of transport and infrastructure a small painting which is worth over a thousand dollars. The minister did not disclose this gift in his returns. Multiple newspapers, among them the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph*, report both incidents. The parliamentary Opposition criticizes the behaviour of both ministers and demands an explanation.

1. How would you assess this situation? How would you describe it in one line?
2. What do you think the minister should do? (and which minister?)
3. What do you think the minister will do? What would you advise?

The minister for resources and energy states she does not understand the uproar. According to her spokesperson, 'the minister is a person of integrity; therefore the trip with the jet is no problem'. The minister for transport and infrastructure claims, both in parliament and on television, to have no memory of a painting as a gift.

1. What do you think of the ministers' accounts?
2. What do think the ministers should do now?
3. What do think the ministers will do now? What would you advise?

The minister for resources and energy stays in office, despite indignation from both the Opposition and flanks of the minister's party. Insiders say anonymously that the premier is wary to force her due to her popularity in the powerful right faction of the party. The minister for transport and infrastructure retracts his statements shortly after his address in parliament. His staff recognized the gift as one of the paintings hanging in a room next to the minister's office. The minister stands by his claims that he does not remember the gift, but has to acknowledge that he misinformed parliament. He announces his resignation after a consultation with the premier.

1. What is your view on the survival and resignation in the cases?
2. Were there other politically viable options?
3. Would new information (contracts with companies) change your mind?

As vignettes are by definition short and ‘selectively simulate elements of the research, they can never fully capture the complex reality’, in this case of ministerial accountability (Hughes and Huby 2002, 286). To address this limitation, the vignettes were complemented with semi-structured interview questions (both before and after the vignettes) and interviewees were provided leeway to expand throughout the discussion of the vignettes. For a more detailed explanation on the construction and validation of the vignettes, see De Ruiter (2019).

4 First Cut: Retreat and Blame Attribution in Different Stages

If we expect blame-avoidance behaviour to follow similar patterns in different systems, the literature instructs us to zoom in on three stages: (1) discussions about the harm of the incident, (2) responsibility for the incident, and (3) political and institutional consequences (Brändström and Kuipers 2003). These three stages are related to the ‘staged retreat’ hypothesis: political executives will start with confrontational tactics in an attempt to get away with denial, and gradually accepting more blame and responsibility once they run out of options.

Table 18.2 shows the expectations of respondents from the vignette interviews. A first broad-brush stroke shows whether Dutch and NSW ministers are primed to use accommodative or confrontational behaviour in each stage.

Overall, the NSW interviewees more often expect ministers to employ confrontational tactics, while Dutch interviewees expect accommodative tactics. In terms of confrontational tactics, problem denial and scapegoating (of bureaucrats) are mentioned as expected blame-avoidance behaviour by two-thirds of the NSW interviewees, and by only one-third of the Dutch. Clearly, more NSW interviewees expect ministers to start with denial of harm caused. For moderately confrontational behaviour, such as justifications, the difference is less clear. Horizontal diffusion of responsibility (focusing on collective responsibility) is mentioned twice as often by Dutch interviewees.

In terms of accommodative tactics, two-thirds of the Dutch interviewees mention excuses and apologies, as opposed to only one-third of the NSW interviewees. In fact, Dutch interviewees trump NSW interviewees in references to all accommodative behaviour in which ministers admit both harm and responsibility (apologies, institutional action-taking, and resignation). Announcing independent inquiries is mentioned by a large majority of interviewees in both systems.

Table 18.2 Quantitative overview of interviewee expectations

Stages	Strongly confrontational behaviour (denial)	Moderately confrontational behaviour	Moderately accommodative behaviour	Strongly accommodative behaviour (admittance)
1	Problem denial	NSW: 18 NL: 9	Limit the agenda	NSW: n/a NL: n/a
	Problem denial + counter attack	NSW: 10 NL: 0	Justifications	NSW: 21 NL: 17
2	Scapegoat others	NSW: 25 NL: 10	Focus on collective responsibility	NSW: 10 NL: 20
3			Excuses (i.e., plea of ignorance) Compensate harm Announce reparative policies	NSW: 12 NL: 20 Announce independent inquiry Apologize NSW: 9 NL: 7 NSW: 15 NL: 20 Admit culpability/resignation NSW: 10 NL: 15

Source: created by authors using data from De Ruiter (2019, 172).

The vignette interviews also offer us much more insight into which tactics interviewees expected in each of the discursive stages of the blame game. After all, reflection and explanation of the respondents reveals under which conditions interviewees expected ministers to use these tactics. Below, we will zoom in on behavioural expectations with regards to the framing of the event or issue, the attribution of responsibility and the political consequences.

5 Confrontation of Accommodation?

5.1 Stage 1: Severity of the Incident

In response to blameworthy events, many more NSW interviewees than Dutch interviewees expect problem denial. In NSW, ministers would pursue problem denial both passively, by ignoring and stonewalling the event, and actively, by claiming no core values had been threatened. They were also expected to opt for more confrontational approaches, by launching a counterattack on the Opposition. One minister explains this strategy as ‘countering the narrative of opponents’ without directly denying the problems caused:

If someone asked a difficult question you didn’t know the answer to . . . You would say: I will, it is typical of the Opposition, comes into this House, every day, fear-mongering about public transport, they hate public transport. You know they don’t want people to take public transport . . . Then you never mislead, the particular might be very true, but I never misled the House. You play the political game. (NSWM5)

By contrast, no Dutch interviewees expect counter-attacks. Both Dutch and NSW ministers are assumed to claim that the resultant harm was less severe than originally asserted and justify their action and the occurrence of the incident. In justifications, ministers admit being responsible for the problems combined with positive stories about the policy or about oneself. Dutch interviewees expected justifications mixed with an announcement of reparative policy initiatives aiming to ‘fix the problem.’

You need to have thought out [before parliamentary discussions]: what kind of developments can I expect, but mostly: where do I want to end up with the commitments I make to parliament? . . . The question is how to improve this [safety problems] in the prison system in the future. Because parliament will say: you have to improve the system immediately. But what can you do about it immediately? I

476 The Politics and Governance of Blame

mean, I would make a good plan and show what has been done already. Often in judgements of the policy there is little attention for what has been done already. People are often not informed, so the minister would need the skills to inform the political actors what has been done already, because then those actors immediately have a better picture. (NLM6)

Dutch ministers therefore implicitly deny the severity of the incident by justifying the policy in terms of showing the benefits and showing ‘what has been done already’ to minimize past woes.

In any case, NSW and Dutch actors both first assess if the incident has caused any identifiable casualties to see whether minimizing the severity of the incidents would be feasible. However, only in rare circumstances would NSW actors immediately discard problem denial as infeasible. In fact, the NSW ministers’ leeway for confrontational tactics rather depends on the minister’s strength and how journalists frame the severity of the event. For passive problem denial, ministers need to be seen as strong and need to be sure a tight front can be formed among their ranks.

They are doing it well if they are in a similar position [all stonewalling]. We [journalists] will ask: ‘Why didn’t you ask these questions, why didn’t you . . .’ You do all that and sometimes you will get nowhere. And then you have to reduce the story to: the inquiry has been announced and is in place. The department is remaining tight-lipped or the minister is tight-lipped. All those clichés have to be called upon . . . And you know: an Opposition calling for this and that is good enough for a certain time, but basically that will go for about two cycles of the news cycle. And after that you will need a little bit more. (NSWJ2)

Dutch ministers are more likely to embrace accommodative tactics, especially in integrity incidents. Denial of harm is constrained by the framing of severity by the moderate Opposition parties and ‘serious’ media.

If he [the minister] is going to yack and uses the wrong strategy in the debate, then things will shift . . . if you are going to downplay [the incident], you will make yourself very vulnerable. And if there is something else, if this is not the first time . . . parliament will be very critical. (NLCS1)

Similar processes influence whether Dutch and NSW ministers can downplay the harm or advocate for the policy. NSW interviewees argue that the leeway for justification depends upon whether the media reports mostly the Opposition stance or the government stance.

In sum, NSW ministers are likely to start with problem denial, while Dutch ministers most likely accommodate, or at least not openly oppose, the severity framing of key players. Tactics also depended on how journalists (NSW) and parliamentarians (Dutch) framed the severity of the event. Framing prevailed over personal characteristics of the minister. In this first stage, informal rules-in-use strongly conditioned the expected blame-avoiding tactics of ministers.

5.2 Stage 2: Responsibility for the Incident

When denying responsibility, NSW interviewees expect ministers to actively employ confrontational tactics. NSW interviewees not only refer more to scapegoating, they also expect ministers to make stronger scapegoating moves, such as the ritual sacking of a bureaucrat. NSW ministers can ‘invite’ an administrative chief to resign, use director generals (DGs) as ‘fall guys’ after letting the DG front the media (NSWM6), and even ‘ceremonially execute’ heads of departments (NSWM1). Also, in response to integrity incidents, NSW ministers blame political staff for forgetting to ‘fill out paperwork’.

If I were the minister, I’d be demanding a public explanation from the chief executive or the director general or whoever it is. I’d be saying that I wanted a report on my desk by the end of the week and that I want to know how they’re going to ameliorate this from happening again in the future. If it does happen again in the future, I would say, ‘Well, did you follow those actions that you promised me that you were going to follow? If not, why not? A full explanation.’ And if there has to be a fall guy, it’s the director general. Start again. (NSWM6)

In contrast, Dutch ministers would argue they were not properly informed by their civil service (NLP8) or that they had a word with involved civil servants (NLM7). Dutch ministers are likely to diffuse responsibility instead of actively denying it. Twenty Dutch interviewees and ten NSW interviewees expect ministers to claim that responsibility is collectively shared. Dutch ministers either refer to previous ministers and their policy legacies, to networks of private actors, or to agencies at arm’s length.

We explained as committee: these are the facts, this went wrong there and ministerial responsibility was present. However, it was not possible to link this responsibility to one minister, but to the history of the policy which created the problem. A string of successive ministers replicated previous policy, which creates a collective

478 The Politics and Governance of Blame

responsibility. Therefore, the current minister is not responsible, but he has to take measures to address the problem. (NLP2)

To address civil service failure, Dutch ministers have to pair diffusion of responsibility with ‘appropriate procedural measures’, such as new policy initiatives. The ministers can then argue that despite not being responsible for the problem occurring, they still address it. To do so, ministers need astute ‘policy skills’ in parliament, combined with solid knowledge of both the failed programme and the new policy initiative (NLM4).

The position and reputation of a minister influences whether and how Dutch and NSW interviewees expect a minister to deny responsibility. Dutch ministers with a strong position would resist scapegoating and ‘stand in front’ of their civil service to shield them from parliamentary criticism. In contrast, strong NSW ministers are more likely to scapegoat. One former chief of staff (NSWMS3) calls this process the ‘axe-minster’ system in Australia. Media and the public expect ‘tough action’ (NSWM1).

Well you know, I don’t think that that is good enough from the minister really. . . . The department stuffed it up in the first place. I mean one response might be to actually drag someone out of the department and make them accountable. So: sack, sack them. In this way, the media gets the blood they want and the people see that tough action has been taken. (NSWM1)

However, NSW interviewees explain only ministers with a clean record can scapegoat credibly. Prior incidents give opponents the opportunity to frame an event as part of a systemic problem and a leadership issue for the political executive.

In NSW, interviewees expect less accommodative tactics generally. Dutch interviewees instead often emphasize excuses such as pleas of ignorance during integrity-related incidents. Dutch ministers can acknowledge the integrity violation of for example receiving gifts or trips from private companies, when they can plea that they didn’t know the value or importance of the gifts. However, ignorance solely works for ministers without a prior record of accusations. They can claim not to be responsible due to a lack of intent.

Well, if someone has a good reputation and he makes such a mistake and he declares: ‘Oh yes, I am sorry, I drank the bottle of wine in the office and I did not realise the value’. He will apologize publicly, then continue. But if someone has multiple problems, has received a motion of no confidence a couple of times and his reputation is weak, then he is in trouble. (NLCS1)

By contrast, NSW interviewees mostly expect ministers to refrain from using excuses after integrity incidents. Considering a history of political integrity scandals in NSW, claiming ignorance is not a credible strategy to parliament and media.

Both NSW and Dutch interviewees strongly emphasize that ministers would announce an independent inquiry. With this tactic, ministers do not actively deny responsibility but try to accommodate other actors, by asking an independent authority to investigate who was responsible and what should be done. Independent inquiries trump all other expected tactics both in response to policy and programmatic blameworthy scenarios. According to almost all interviewees (forty), ministers must install independent inquiries themselves early, to avoid being pressured into one by their opponents in the media or parliament.

To summarize, NSW interviewees mentioned more ‘extreme’ behaviour of responsibility denial, such as sacking of senior civil servants. Dutch interviewees indeed mentioned more accommodative behaviour, but one of them, excuses, was not positively interpreted. In this stage, the personal reputation of the minister strongly conditions whether they can credibly employ responsibility denial tactics. Both Dutch and NSW were overtly positive about independent inquiries under almost all conditions, but especially at the start of a blame game.

5.3 Stage 3: Political and Personal Consequences—Embrace or Resist Sanctions?

To mitigate political consequences, most interviewees refer to accommodative tactics focusing on reparative policy as well as admitting personal responsibility and culpability. Only a minority of the interviewees expect ministers to compensate harm; that is, allocating budget to those affected by the incident. In both systems respondents expect ministers to combine either justifications or apologies with institutional action-taking by means of reparative policies or procedures. Ministers can announce new policy measures to show a ‘never again’ approach and meanwhile underline the sincerity of the apology. Dutch interviewees almost always invoke the Dutch adagio ‘stepping up and not stepping down’ related to justifications.

Personal responsibility admission of ministers is expected by thirty interviewees, the majority being Dutch (18:12). Ministers would likely apologize for the ‘lack of political acumen’ (NLM1) or for ‘the upheaval caused’ (NSWJ2). Only in relation to integrity incidents did some interviewees

480 The Politics and Governance of Blame

specifically expect ministers to swiftly acknowledge wrongdoing and apologize early in the blame game.

Interviewees across both systems expect ministers to resign after incidents. This result could be partly an effect of interviewer prompting: all vignettes hinted at resignation. In the general literature, this step is the matter of ‘last resort’, and both in the Netherlands and NSW forced resignations rarely happen. Also, interviewees stressed that ministers were only expected to resign under exceptional circumstances. Especially in NSW a minister would sooner be reshuffled to another portfolio than resign.

Both NSW and Dutch interviewees expected ministers to announce institutional measures when accompanying blame-avoiding tactics, such as justifications, were still politically feasible. NSW ministers were more likely to apologize and resign when media strongly called for their resignation. However, the position of the ministers’ own party and the premier were considered crucial. Dutch ministers were more likely to apologize and resign when moderate Opposition parties called for them to do so. The position of the coalition partner was considered crucial.

On balance, Dutch interviewees expected accommodative behaviour in this stage more often than NSW interviewees. Dutch and NSW interviewees related the feasibility of admission behaviour to how other media (NSW) and parliamentarians (Dutch) probably assessed the strength of the minister in this stage. However, both interviewee groups focused on ‘high politics’ and the perceived position of the premier and (coalition) party when explaining which tactic could be feasibly expected.

6 The Dramaturgy of Blame Avoidance

Overall, interviewees in both systems emphasized the importance of dramatic staging and scripting of tactics. Ministers are expected to stage their performance, to script their tactics in proper speech acts, and to build a compelling story. The next sections will present similarities and differences in staging, scripting and storytelling across the two institutional settings.

7 Staging

How ministers set the stage for their tactics in the media needs to reflect and reinforce the content of the minister’s tactics. A minister must convincingly deliver blame-avoiding tropes and ‘show control’ over the incident in the media. Yet if a minister denies the severity of the incident, the minister looks

more in control in a ‘one-on-one interview with a single reporter’ than ‘ten people shouting questions’ (NSWMS5).

Setting the stage could also mean ministers deliberately shun media appearances. When NSW ministers intend to scapegoat civil servants, they cast them in the spotlight instead, as lightning rods. Ministerial staffers in the vignette interviews point to the tactic of letting bureaucrats front the media and parliament to ‘show that it’s just an operational problem, not a policy issue’ (NSWMS5, NSWMS6). A civil servant explains:

The tactical decision would have been that any photograph or clip [of the minister] before this enquiry would suggest that there is something wrong. The mere fact that the minister is there is to some extent to concede that the minister has something to answer for. Whereas not being there does not concede that. Having me there explaining you know the agency’s view about our proper responsibility was a kind of best of all worlds. (NSWCS5)

Attending an incident-related ceremony or visit an affected community or site was an oft-mentioned staging device. A former premier noted that during such occasions, ministers are to display ‘the right mixture of strength and compassion’ (NSWM4), listen, care, be active, and—if not too preposterous—act as if they are in control.

And to me, the people who succeed in these circumstances are not just those ones who stand up and have asked for a review, they’re the ones who can stand up and say, ‘I’ve been to Mortdale.’ It’s a maintenance yard for trains, but let’s just say for argument’s sake it’s for trams. ‘This morning I’ve been down to Mortdale, to the holding yard . . . The senior maintenance leader for these, he has shown me where the problem lies. I’m not an engineer, but even I could see that this is concerning’ and ‘What we have done today is X. What will happen from now is X.’ So it’s talking about instigating a process, but not while I sit in my tower. I’ve actually gone to the place. (NSWMS7)

Dutch interviewees focused more on ministers’ parliamentary appearances, where the opportunities for staging are more limited as Dutch ministers are not MPs and can rarely control the timing and dramaturgy of their appearances in parliament.

8 Scripting

Ministers also script their tactics in accordance with the audience they address. Dutch interviewees assert how ministers should show parliament

482 The Politics and Governance of Blame

their policy expertise and ‘respect’. Proper speech acts would acknowledge parliament’s prerogative in holding ministers to account, and deference to the norms on prompt provision of accurate and comprehensive information.

Sometimes the debate can zoom in and on a certain moment, you see that the minister does not take parliament seriously and then the tone can shift . . . If parliament feels offended, even the more traditional parties would consider this a reason to draw a line: this is not appropriate. That is the reason advisors often say: [minister name], repent, say sorry, and be humble. This behaviour gives the coalition parties leeway to say: the minister showed understanding; he showed repentance. (NLP1)

Dutch parliamentarians and former ministers underline the need to create a ‘certain atmosphere and rapport’ with parliamentarians as vital for tactics to land.

It makes it for ministers just very easy to play with parliament and get away with vague stories. For example, [minister name] is a very kind person and he often said: ‘Mister [parliamentarian name] has made an excellent point.’ And then you think: ‘Oh, oh [makes a faux proud face]’ and in the meantime you haven’t really listened to the answer. What did he really say? (NLP1)

In terms of appropriate speech acts, one-third of Dutch and NSW interviewees reflected on the difficult feat of both hedging and radiating certainty. Hedging refers to the use of guarded language, such as ‘I am advised’ (NSWM5) and ‘to the best of my knowledge’ (NLJ6, NLM7, NSWJ2). According to a NSW journalist (NSWJ2), hedging separates ‘the bright ministers from the not so bright ministers’. A ministerial staffer also points to hedging in terms of promising reviews and other investigations.

But he said: we will consider it, and that was a trick. Because it just got him through the problem, because he said the words we consider . . . See, language is really important. I would look at the word review. If someone says they are going to review something, this could be a review: I looked at it, and decided not to do it. So . . . if someone says they will scrap, that is something different. He said that they would consider reducing the costs of the cross-city tunnel, which means they are probably not going to do it. (NSWMS4)

Ministers are expected to script their tactics to their audience in such a way that they will not be forced to backtrack and can maintain room to manoeuvre after an incident.

9 Storytelling

Ministers often use more than one line of defence simultaneously. Weaving these into a consistent and more comprehensive story is considered important. This strategy resonates with Hajer's (1995, 645) emphasis on larger storylines: 'devices through which actors are positioned, and through which specific ideas of "blame" and "responsibility", and of "urgency" and "responsible behaviour" are attributed'. Both Dutch and NSW interviewees often mention ministers combining two or three related tactics in order to strengthen their effect. For example, interviewees pair apologies and acknowledgements of 'wrongdoing' with promises of institutional action-taking, to reinforce the promise the incident 'will never happen again'.

Most blame-avoidance research focuses on the blame-avoiding effect of individual tactics. A focus on individual strategies could blind us from how ministers use tactics as building-blocks in a larger narrative. Ministerial blame avoidance entails more than a series of ad-hoc, defensive-reactive verbal responses to accountability questions. It is supposed to entail the purposeful staging, scripting, and narration of accountability performances.

10 Evaluating Ministerial Blame Avoidance

Not only did interviewees use the vignettes to reflect how they *expect* ministers to react, they also often spent a considerable part of their response *assessing* the appropriateness and effectiveness of ministerial blame avoidance.

While NSW interviewees uniformly expect ministers to use confrontational tactics more often than their Dutch counterparts, they differed in their assessments of the consequences and the appropriateness of various confrontational tactics. For example, NSW interviewees often expected ministers to use scapegoating behaviour. Some interviewees assessed this tactic as effective for ministers in framing themselves as 'part of the answer' for the incident (NSWM5, NSWMS4):

At the same time, you run a media campaign to convince the public what you are doing, to convince the public that you are part of the answer and not part of the problem. This can be done with clever positioning. Sometimes you can become critical of your own department, because what the people want to hear is a champion, who is addressing their issues and who still cops criticism from commentators and the media. But, the guy who catches the train at Sydney, he wants to hear: 'this is not good enough, this is going to be fixed.' 'Well, at last someone

484 The Politics and Governance of Blame

who is going to do something about it.’ You always have to create some credibility with that, because if it is not fixed than you have a problem. (NSWM5)

However, nine other NSW interviewees argued that scapegoating *de facto* amounted to admitting executive failure on their watch:

I have been in really horrible attacks where I have actually said to the minister ‘Do you want me to resign?’ and he said ‘You would have to be joking’, he said ‘in effect, that will just increase the pressure on me and then the department will become totally immobilized’. (NSWCS2)

Dutch interviewees instead predominantly expect accommodative behaviour and also endorse it. But while some praise the tactic of announcing fixes, by vowing to ‘step up and not step down’, as ‘learning from mistakes’ and diminishing blame by showing ‘tough action’, others denounce these as platitudes. As one Dutch journalist summarizes the ambivalence:

A political executive can make up for his mistakes by grasping the nettle. If you want to know what I think about it, I would say: sounds nice, sounds good. It fits well with the public appreciation for vigour . . . Vigour is appreciated over thoughtfulness, which fits a broader tendency in Dutch politics, but it is also an explanation of ministerial responsibility in which you don’t have to step down as long as you step up. And this undermines its constitutional meaning. (NLJ2)

As a result, prominent tactics were often also contested in their political environments, both in terms of effectiveness and appropriateness.

Some tactics scored well on both effectiveness and appropriateness in each political system. Announcing independent inquiries is in the eyes of interviewees likely to have positive consequences: political ‘shelving’ of the incident, control over the inquiry, and showcasing willingness to learn. An independent investigation ‘freezes’ the incident and puts it in a holding pen (NLM4, NSWM1, NSWM3): the Opposition’s criticism halts and media attention will shift, temporally, to other issues. In both systems, independent inquiries are a ‘classical approach’ (NLJ3), part of a ritual response for ministers after policy failures.

It is a reflex, you know? And the public likes to see it this way . . . You can see that such an investigation funnels emotions. (NLCS6)

Independent investigations are apparently so ingrained in both political systems that some regard them as ‘normal procedures’. Such (accommodative)

strategies can be seen as blame-avoiding ‘rules-in-use’, even in confrontational systems.

NSW and Dutch actors tend to use different logics to evaluate blame avoidance. While NSW interviewees mostly assess tactics on their effectiveness, the Dutch evaluate tactics in terms of their appropriateness. Some Dutch interviewees assert that if a tactic is culturally inappropriate, it cannot be politically effective. Ten Dutch interviewees even label some norm-violating tactics as ‘mortal sins’, such as scapegoating civil servants (NLCS1) and misinforming parliament:

If he provides parliament with the wrong information, he will have to resign. At that point, the debate shifts away from the content of the policy failure . . . It is like a law, the biggest sin you can commit in politics is providing parliament with the wrong information intentionally. (NLP8)

Actors upholding these norms often play an active role, whether public or not, in supporting, countering, and judging ministers’ strategies in blame games. These actors often pass sanctions for political executives after blame games and their evaluations could shift the balance between successful blame avoidance and resignation.

11 Conclusion: The ‘Staged Retreat’ across Different Polities

To conclude, how elite actors expect ministers to behave in response to blameworthy events indeed differs across political systems. In relation to the staged retreat hypothesis, this comparative vignette research shows that at least in one consensual political system, elite actors expect different blame-avoiding behaviour than their majoritarian counterparts. NSW interviewees expected more confrontation across the board, such as counter-attacks and scapegoating, and thus more of a staged retreat, while Dutch interviewees expected more accommodative tactics, such as excuses and apologies. Although often neglected in blame-avoidance studies, formal and informal institutional factors influence the leeway for officeholders and their opponents to dodge or attribute blame or successfully reallocate blame to others, as expressed through rules-in-use and accepted practices among elite actors.

In addition, formal and informal institutional rules can be interlinked and they reinforce each other. This comparison of blame games in a majoritarian and consensual political system suggests that ministers who are bound by

486 The Politics and Governance of Blame

stronger formal parliamentary accountability and informal norms regarding appropriate account-giving are expected to take hierarchical responsibility more often. In the Netherlands, scapegoating of top-level civil servants is considered both improbable due to the strong statutory position of Dutch civil servants and inappropriate because a ‘strong minister’ would not do it and parliamentarians do not support it. NSW ministers are less bound by such institutional factors. Instead, NSW ministers are bound by more explicit and implicit expectations regarding their behaviour on issues of propriety and corrupt conduct due to their system’s history of integrity scandals.

However, this chapter also found some important overlap in elite expectations across both systems, underlining the need to look further than institutional context. First, prominent tactics were often also contested, both in terms of effectiveness and appropriateness. While NSW interviewees expected confrontational tactics more often, they were also firmly divided on their effectiveness. Dutch interviewees were equally divided judging the effectiveness of their accommodative behaviour. Dutch and NSW actors both appreciated the appropriateness and effectiveness of announcing independent inquiries. They preferred it over all other tactics. This preference indicates that particularly accommodative tactics can even prevail in confrontational environments. Second, both Dutch and NSW interviewees conditioned the tactics in each stage, focusing on different contextual factors. In all vignette discussions, informal rules-in-use coincide with non-institutional factors such as the popularity of the officeholder or the saliency of the incident. Ministers with a limited rap sheet and ‘strong reputation’ have more opportunity to manoeuvre, while other ministers are slowly ‘backed into a corner’ as their political capital begins to wane.

In addition, this study showed that blame-avoiding behaviour needs to be bolstered by dramaturgical elements. While the systems differ with regard to expected rhetorical behaviour, interviewees across both systems agree that ministers should stage their media performance and script their performance accordingly. For example, NSW ministers who want to pursue problem denial tactics need to think about a proper way to stage their press conference so that they look ‘in control’, while Dutch ministers need to think in their speech about how they pay deference to parliament as an institution.

Overall, the chapter shows that blame games entail more than a series of ad-hoc, attack-reaction verbal exchanges; they are expressions of subtle institutional arrangements and expectations of what are legitimate public actions (Leong and Howlett 2017). This also aligns with Leong and Howlett’s call that blame games should be ‘analysed as part of the larger issue of the legitimization of public actions, rather than, as is often the case, solely as an aspect of

the utilitarian calculations and risk management activities of politicians and officials' (Leong and Howlett 2017, 599).

In terms of limitations, this chapter relies on a limited study of two parliamentary systems, and it would require a more extensive comparative study with both elite interviews and case study analysis across a wider selection of parliamentary systems to see if these initial conclusions hold.

For future research, an open question pertains to the process and outcomes of blame games where institutions themselves are questioned or contested. Olsen (2017) argued that those moments of turbulence can expose and challenge the formal and informal rules that would ordinarily affect blame games. One example is the role of institutional settings in blame games wherein 'outsider' actors play a prominent role. If news cycles and the rise of social media provide a more prominent role to institutional 'outsiders', the question is to what extent this will affect the impact of institutional settings in shaping blame games.

Also, the structuring role of political institutions is more ambiguous in multi-level blame games, which span political systems and where formal and informal institutions of multiple systems interact. An example could be blame games which bridge national and European levels, such as the prevailing discussion over the uptake of asylum seekers who arrive in the southern European countries. A study of multi-level blame games could provide insight into how political executives who are caught up in multi-level blame games manage and satisfy expectations from different accountability regimes.

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488 The Politics and Governance of Blame

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