

Alastair Stark

Institutional Amnesia in Government how much is enough?

Abstract

The concept of institutional amnesia represents a means of describing the loss of policy-relevant knowledge across time. This loss is keenly felt in all government institutions and typically leads to a conclusion that institutional amnesia is a problem to be fixed. However, there are positives that can be associated with a lack of memory. This article explores the good and the bad of memory loss by asking ‘how much amnesia is enough?’ This question prompts a discussion of the nature of amnesia in government, where it is most keenly felt, what causes it and the effects it produces.

Keywords institutional amnesia, organisational memory, public policy, public sector performance, historical storytelling

The inability of policymaking agencies to recall and use past knowledge in contemporary practices represents a form of institutional amnesia. This lack of memory permeates every aspect of the policymaking process and is an inherent feature of all policymaking institutions. Indeed, one might argue that memory loss is intrinsic to all large-scale organisations, simply because of the inevitable tides of

turnover and change that wash over them. These tides erode memory of the past and leave us with a feeling that we have lost something in terms of our knowledge of public policy. Consequently, we tend to view memory loss as a negative thing. It's not hard to see why. Regardless of whether we use the term amnesia or simply talk about organisational memory loss, we are still dealing with a metaphor that tells us

we are missing something important. What few studies we have about institutional amnesia tend to reinforce this negativity by emphasising the many problems caused by a lack of public service memory (Pollitt, 2000, 2009; Stark, 2019). However, there are benefits to forgetfulness. When it comes to public policy, amnesia can help us move on from problematic pasts, innovate away from dysfunctional histories and develop greater levels of generalist knowledge at the systemic level. These benefits are largely ignored in the research on memory, but they beg the question that headlines this article: how much amnesia is enough? This article addresses this question through a theoretical discussion that defines institutional amnesia, explores the nature of memory and its loss, and then sets out the benefits and problems associated with institutional amnesia.

Memory loss in the precincts of the policy process

We can begin to address the question set out above by defining the concept of institutional amnesia and exploring how it influences policymaking broadly. A simple definition from Stark and Head gives us a starting point, as they tell us that

Alastair Stark is an associate professor in public policy at the University of Queensland. His current research focuses on policy learning and the nature of institutional memory in public services.

institutional amnesia is reflected in ‘the intentional or unintentional ways in which government agents and organizations or non-government agents and organizations no longer remember or record policy-relevant lessons from the past’ (Stark and Head, 2019, p.1526).

This rather prosaic definition can be brought to life by looking at its constituent elements and how they apply in the various precincts of the policy process. Our first step in this regard is to understand institutional memory, which we can do through the identification of four locations in which we can find knowledge of the past

- *Social remembering in organisational cultures.* Organisational cultures are made up of shared ideas and the individuals who talk about them. Memory resides within these stories. Among other things, people talk about the creation of the organisation they work for, the times when the organisation has faced turbulence in the form of a crisis, and other moments of monumental change in which the culture itself has adapted (Boje, 2008). These stories and the ideas within them memorialise past events but, of course, they do so in a selective way which is

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(ibid.). In each location we can define what institutional memory looks like and then think about its absence, which takes us to amnesia:

- *Formal institutional storage bins.* These are the locations which knowledge management specialists might typically focus upon. In these locations memories from the past are encoded and stored in the business-as-usual practices of the organisation: the rules, the operating procedures, the objectives, and, of course, the files, however kept (Walsh and Ungson, 1991). The converse image of amnesia we can get from this view of memory tells us that it can be evidenced in the decay or abandonment of these organisational features, and that this can lead to an inability to retrieve and use the past knowledge which created them in the first instance. Thus, as we lose organisational capacities created from the lessons of history, we create institutional amnesia.

stylised and changed through hindsight, time and the process of forgetting (Linde, 2009). Despite these reinterpretations, narratives of the past are a crucial location for memory because they can explain and justify the reasons why the world (in policymaking terms) looks the way it does. The converse image we get from this view of memory is a world in which institutional amnesia means that we do lots of things without ever really knowing the story of why we do them (Stark and Head, 2019). Thus, as we lose the narratives of the past, we create institutional amnesia.

- *External memory ‘out there’.* Backing up your computer’s memory in an external storage location just makes good sense, but when it comes to policy memory, there is a tendency to think about it as something that ought to be retained in-house. Yet the policy world now contains as many external actors as it does internal ones in government.

Consequently, we need to also think about external forms of memory, which can be found in different sectors and non-governmental actors. It’s an open question whether non-government organisations have more memory than their government counterparts, but the implication of acknowledging their existence in terms of memory means that we need to think about amnesia in networked or systemic terms (Corbett et al., 2018). In a policy community some actors might hold certain memories while others do not, and vice versa. Thus, as the world of non-state policymaking grows and we ‘outsource’ memory to external sites, institutional amnesia is created within government but only if government actors cannot connect to those external locations.

- *Political framing.* The Merriam-Webster dictionary has three definitions for amnesia. The first two – a gap in one’s memory or a loss of memory – are conventional, but the third tells us that amnesia is also about ‘the selective overlooking or ignoring of events or acts that are not favorable or useful to one’s purpose or position’. This takes us directly to the politics of memory and amnesia’s role within it. Politicians frame issues in ways which promote one version of history and downplay others. This is an enduring feature of politics, with many facets (Brändström, Bynander and ‘t Hart, 2004). However, at the level of policy we can also observe the same efforts from those who wish to engender reform (de Holan, 2011). In both cases those who wish for change are mobilising the past in ways that allow for their preferred actions in the present, which means that a selective form of memory exists in the politics of any given day. In this process, a degree of amnesia is indispensable because a clear and coherent memory of past events cannot be manipulated easily: time and forgetting are required for the past to become malleable. Thus, as political actors exploit this malleability, institutional amnesia is created.

How do these dimensions of amnesia play out in the policy process? In the political beginnings of that process, we can

see institutional memory loss in many of the demands that are made about what should be on the agenda of government. Today's young climate change activists, for example, frame their policy demands through indictments of previous generations and past decisions. Their narratives tell us that past generations were asleep at the wheel, that we denied climate change was happening and that they (not us) are now paying the price for our lack of stewardship. These efforts rewrite history in a manner that leads to 'a forgetting' of the fact that those previous generations fought (and won and lost) in the same battle that they now believe they own exclusively. This framing is important for their momentum as they draw energy for their activism from it.

Perhaps, you might think, memory is better served in the political organisations which subsequently decide upon policy that has made it onto the agenda. Our legislatures and executives are, after all, some of our longest surviving institutions. However, while visitors continue to flock to the guided tours and souvenir shops that teach the history of a parliament, those who serve inside them come and go with such regularity that these institutions can never obtain a working institutional memory. This amnesia, when combined with the overriding political impulse to propose reform and decide on change, regularly leads to a recycling of old ideas as the next big thing (Pollitt, 2000). The list of ideas that have come, gone and returned again is as long as your own age and memory allow for: if you are old, you will have seen many New Public Management ideas circling continuously; slightly younger and you will have observed how the need for evidence-based policy or joined-up government have come and gone in various ways over the years; and (if you are very young) behavioural economics might seem very here and now, but not if you were around the first time we discussed 'bounded rationality'. All of these aspects of policy and public management have been done before, all have been partially forgotten and partially remembered and then all have been repackaged and resold politically in certain respects.

In the bureaucratic milieu of the policy process we see similar dynamics, but

(perhaps) greater awareness of them. Long-serving public servants see their colleagues coming and going because of the patterns of turnover and structural change that define their organisational homes. And they know that these patterns will affect the ability of their organisations to remember the decisions that explain why policies and business-as-usual look the way they do. Alongside the loss of what researchers call the 'why' rationale (why do we do this? Why do we not do that?) are a series of other claims about the loss of memory in our public agencies. Among other things, institutional amnesia is said to render policy learning gains meaningless

does and how they can navigate through it effectively. However, your new organisation will certainly benefit from your past and your experience, and, again potentially, your replacement might also enjoy a new position in which they are not bound by the past and are able to do things differently and (perhaps) more creatively. These are the two primary benefits that can come with amnesia: innovation via freedom from historical decisions and processes (de Holan, 2011), and an enlargement of inter-organisational knowledge (Corbett et al., 2018). In relation to both, the benefits are not merely situated at the level of the individual. The more secondments and

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because we cannot recall them when the next issue strikes (Stark, 2019). Memory loss is also said to lead to a lack of commitment to long-term reform as we cannot remember why or who had the will to change in the first instance or what the point of it all was (ibid). And amnesia can also be registered in declines in coordination and connectivity in government as memory of who does what and why shifts (ibid.).

However, we have already stated that institutional amnesia can also be positive. Accepting that amnesia can be a good thing begins with an acceptance that change can also be healthy and productive. For the individual public servant this can be felt most easily in the benefits that come with a change in post. If you have spent a considerable period of time in your previous role, the organisation that you worked in is likely to keenly feel the loss of the memory you have taken with you. Potentially, your replacement (assuming your post has been replaced, of course) will struggle the most to work out why the world you know so well looks the way it

movement we have across a public service, the more we develop a general level of systemic knowledge. The more we free ourselves from the institutional straightjackets of the past, the greater the innovations might be at an organisational or even systemic level.

These positives and negatives animate an ongoing debate among researchers about memory loss in government. Some have come to the study of organisational memory with negative baggage from their specialist research areas. Studies of lesson-learning after crises and disasters, for example, show how post-crisis lessons are formulated, accepted, and very often implemented, but by the time the next big crisis arrives, they have been forgotten (Stark, 2019). The cyclical patterns that repeat the failures of past crises therefore urge them to vilify amnesia. However, others push back against this cynicism with evidence that memory is strong in certain policy areas because of its deep ingraining in organisational cultures and discourse (Corbett et al., 2018). Both views have merit, and of course they beget a better

question than whether institutional amnesia is good or bad, which is: what level of amnesia is appropriate in a public service context? How much amnesia is enough? The spoiler alert in relation to the answer to this question is that, unfortunately, you will need to answer that for yourself in relation to your specific context. And to compound the issue, that answer will need to be qualitative, as we cannot capture an amount of memory in quantitative terms. However, what follows can guide you

companies, have made the case that organisational forgetting is necessary when it comes to innovation. Indeed, for de Holan (2011, p.317), 'the impact of organizational forgetting can be momentous' in this regard because once it is recognised as a necessary element in organisational change, amnesia can be encouraged strategically to good effect. The goal in this regard is realised when change makers ensure that problematic pasts have been forgotten so that reform-

are only adopted partially and conflict and instability are likely in a change process (ibid.). This final point is certainly reinforced in the many analyses of intransigence conducted in the policy sciences that show us how efforts at reform fail. These tell us that efforts at change continually run into resistance, which leads to partial forms of implementation and a consequential form of outcome that exists somewhere between a problematic past and a completely reformed future (Pierson, 2004; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Lipsky, 2010). If the organisational theorists concerned with unlearning are correct, however, some of the resistance to change that we see in these analyses could be ameliorated if (at the very least) reform leaders focused actively on unlearning and (at the very most) encouraged an active form of dismantling of historical discourses and practices to 'clear the decks' prior to the introduction of an innovation. Institutional amnesia would be the end state of this unlearning process and the beginning state for an effective reform process.

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towards your own answer via a theoretical discussion of the positives and negatives of amnesia, the variety of types of memory loss that public sectors experience, and the differences we see in it across a variety of organisational locations.

The positives and the negatives of institutional amnesia

There has been an optimistic turn in the policy sciences recently, which is characterised by studies of policy and public administration success ('t Hart and Compton, 2019) and larger calls for policy researchers to push back against negativity (Douglas et al., 2021). In recognition of this let us begin by setting out some of the positives that underscore why we should not default to a mode of negative thinking about institutional amnesia.

Innovation and strategic action

Organisational scholars, albeit ones who have focused primarily on private sector

focused futures can be pursued. This state of amnesia is reached, according to de Holan (ibid., p.318), through processes of 'unlearning' in relation to established behavioural patterns that are a problematic manifestation of the past. These manifestations reside in a variety of locations which typically hold memory in any organisation: assets, routines, structures and understandings.

This kind of amnesia is purposeful rather than accidental, and it represents a form of 'managed unlearning' (de Holan and Phillips, 2004, p.1611) which allows dysfunctional knowledge to be discarded. The momentum behind this active process, it is argued, should come via an acknowledgement that change efforts will be less effective in the absence of deliberate efforts to forget. This is because organisational forgetting ensures that elements from a problematic past do not exist simultaneously with new innovations in the present. When both exist, innovations

Generalist knowledge, systemic learning and avoiding stagnation

One of the most persistent myths associated with the public servant is that they are – and ought to be – generalists (Presthus, 1964; Greenaway, 2004). In its original form this view spoke of the roundly educated 'amateur' whose liberal arts degree meant that they had the training to speak to all policy concerns and work in all the major branches of government. Generations of scholars have spoken about the demise of this myth in public service systems around the world, but, of course, the principles that led to the emergence of the generalist myth were sound ones. Public servants should not operate exclusively in their own fiefdoms and they should have an awareness of the whole of government and their place within it.

While originally created as a means of avoiding patronage and corruption, these principles can today be applied to contemporary problems and, consequently, we can see the use of temporary secondments and the movement of public servants between posts more generally as

a positive thing. Thus, rather than seeing turnover and the rotation of staff as amnesia-inducing dynamics, we might instead see them as a means of enhancing the collective intelligence of a public service, which in turn might enhance coordination and collaboration at a systemic level. This view reflects a long-running focus that can be found in studies of public administration, which have reflected on what a good level of public service turnover looks like. As far back as 1936, for example, nuanced arguments were being made that suggested that high levels of staff ‘churn’ does not immediately equate to a dysfunctional public service. As Mosher and Kingsley (1936, p.286) stated, ‘[t]here is no single desirable rate of turnover for all establishments, except that it should be (a) sufficiently large to prevent stagnation and (b) sufficiently small to reflect healthy working conditions’. Abelson and Baysinger (1984) more formally proposed an inverted U-shaped relationship between turnover and organisational performance: low to moderate levels of turnover would be likely to improve performance with the injection of fresh ideas and energy and the replacement of low-performing employees, but costs would start outweighing this benefit with higher rates of turnover. More contemporary studies have also found that turnover can be beneficial in terms of improving street-level delivery of public services, such as education (Meier and Hicklin, 2007).

Overcoming trauma and catharsis

Institutional forgetting can be beneficial when it comes to overcoming collectively shared trauma (Edkins, 2003). Studies of memorialisation after conflicts, for example, tell us that societies can heal by putting violence behind them through a degree of social forgetting (Bell, 2006). In keeping with the discussion above, we can certainly see moments within the life of a public service or a specific policy domain which ought to be forgotten so that a new future can be moved towards. Public inquiries, for example, often provide a degree of catharsis around policy failures, which then allows a new policy path to be opened and the failure forgotten. Similarly, we can observe organisational restructuring or significant organisational

reform in the same way: a line in the sand is drawn, a new direction is taken, and the negative emotions associated with the past can be moved away from. There are two sides to this potential benefit, however. In colonised contexts, for example, we can observe powerful opposing arguments which suggest that this is highly problematic because it can be a means of erasing memory of trauma that needs to be better recognised in the here and now (Alcof, 2007). When it comes to

remember what has not worked in the past. Yet when it comes to policy learning we can see institutional amnesia creating an input and an output problem. The input problem is simply expressed: we forget about the ideas that did not work in the past and then resuscitate them as new innovations, which tend to be doomed to fail. Thus, problematic ideas that have already been tested and found wanting are re-used as the genesis of new reforms. This reinventing of the wheel occurs on

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First Nations policymaking, for example, a form of wilful amnesia has been identified as a cause of settlers ‘looking away’ from the past in order to ignore the ongoing problems of colonisation in the present. This form of ‘epistemic ignorance’ can lead to problematic forms of policy inaction, which in turn leads to deliberate forms of ‘forgetting’ (Brown and Stark, 2022).

This final point alerts us to one of the many problems caused by amnesia. We can now turn to those more fully. As discussed above, the view of amnesia as a negative state of affairs is much more prevalent in the literature, which means there is much more research which discusses the problems rather than the positives of amnesia. For the sake of brevity, three of the most important issues are focused on below. More can be found in Pollitt (2009) and Stark and Head (2019).

Policy learning issues: recycled ideas and repeated behaviour

When it comes to learning about policy, a public service needs to be able to

multiple levels. At the individual level, public servants regularly conduct analyses and evaluations of policy which have been done before. When it comes to this issue at the systemic level, any long-serving public servant can easily reel off a series of changes which they have experienced that have disregarded past failures of a similar nature. Waves of centralisation and decentralisation, for example, continue without much regard for an understanding of their effects in the past. Regardless of whether it is systemic or individual learning that is affected, the key issue is that reinventing the wheel is an inefficient way to recycle failed policy ideas.

At the outcome end of the policy learning problem is the combined problem of weak storage bins and poor storytelling. This problem can appear at the end of a successful process in which learning has taken place, a change has been implemented, but both are then forgotten. An illustrative example relates to policy coordination. If you choose any large-scale crisis or disaster in New Zealand’s recent history, you will

see that one of the lessons identified was the need for better coordination. This is a ubiquitous finding of almost every post-crisis inquiry. Consequently, public agencies learn and coordinate better in the immediate aftermath of failures. But these gains are short-lived. When the memory of the crisis is strong coordination efforts make sense, but slowly, as memory evaporates, resource-consuming efforts at coordination naturally start to reduce and the next public inquiry will make the case all over again that better coordination is required. This represents another seemingly inevitable process of recycling caused by amnesia.

Long-term reform failure

When long-term reform demands sustained expenditure commitments over time, reform champions are required. The most powerful of these are, of course, found in executives. When ministers act as champions for reform the forces of inertia can be reduced, and change can occur, but it is not difficult to see why momentum from the minister's office cannot always be sustained. Cabinet reshuffles, leadership changes, electoral dynamics linked to the whims of the public, and, of course, the modern media cycle all mean that ministers have a very low capacity when it comes to memory. They are constantly moving and do not have the time or inclination to look backwards. This can blight a long-term reform journey and leave stakeholders frustrated. External stakeholders, for example, often lament the time and resources that they feed into the minister's office in order to help them learn their portfolio only for the reset button to be hit through a reshuffle and the process to begin all over again (Stark, 2019). Ministers themselves also feel frustrated by the lack of continuity (Stark and Head, 2019), and it is interesting to reflect on the idea of ministerial memory

in that regard. Resources certainly exist to ensure continuity of government during moments of ministerial change, but these tend to be procedural in nature and do not necessarily allow ministers to understand policy in a substantive way. Knowledge management, it often seems, is something for the public official but not necessarily the minister. Yet if long-term policies are to be championed across time, then these fast-moving hyper-amnesiacs will need much more support.

The loss of craft as a capacity

A strong public service needs technical excellence and public administrators who have 'craft' skills (Rhodes, 2016). These skills often relate to the intangible and tacit skill set required to do the job: political nous, judgement, diplomacy, relationship building and stewardship, among other things. However, viewing craft skills as a capacity means acknowledging how experience builds a public servant's identity, their ethical compass, and the variety of relational skills required to navigate successfully in the public sector world. Mastery of these skills requires time, as a great deal of craft knowledge is not written down but rather learned on the job. As Goodsell noted, 'to be taught, the subtleties of administration require direct demonstration; to be learned they require first-hand experience' (Goodsell, 1992, p.249).

However, the forces of institutional amnesia can undermine the development of craft skills in at least two ways. First, as the notion of the permanent public sector career is forgotten, the identity of the public servant changes, moving from something long-term to something shorter-term. This shift in identity can undermine the commitment to long-term craft skill building that comes with a co-commitment to career and a vocation. Second, when public services are volatile

in terms of institutional change – meaning lots of turnover and lots of structural reform – it can become difficult to develop skills across the longer term because the accrual of experience often requires stability. There is, therefore, a link between losses in memory and losses in craft capacity.

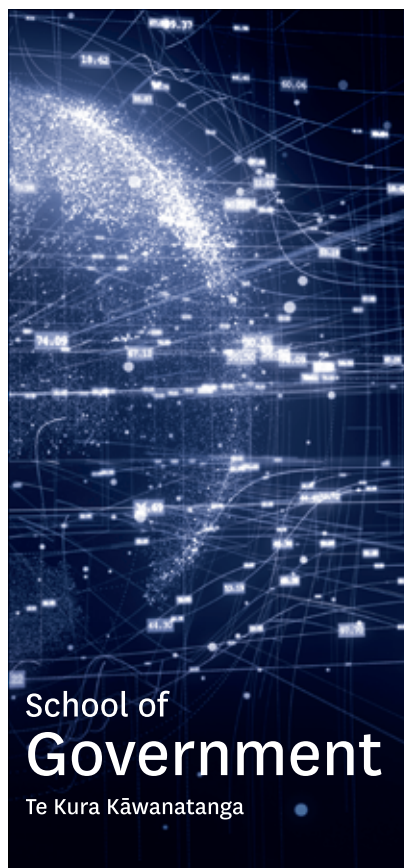
Conclusion

How much amnesia is enough? We certainly want enough memory loss to encourage necessary breaks from problematic pasts. When bad policy processes and outcomes prove to be intransigent, they ought to be changed and then quickly forgotten about as bad behaviours that we wish to move away from. However, we also need enough memory to remember those intransigent failures as cautionary stories for the future so that the bad wheel is not reinvented in a new guise. We need to have public services with mobile staff who can develop their skills and knowledge in inter-organisational ways, and we need to accept that the creation of good generalist knowledge in this way comes with some institutional amnesia. However, this mobility should not mean the loss of those crucial 'why' rationales that explain everyday practices and business-as-usual processes. Nor should it undermine the development of the craft of the public servant because that craft facilitates the long-term stewardship of large-scale policy programmes. Indeed, the concept of stewardship is crucial here and worth reflecting on. Rather than asking how much amnesia is enough today, that concept encourages us to ask instead: what state will our public services and public policies be in tomorrow when the next generation inherits them? This is a much better question because it reminds us that we curate our history and fight to maintain our memory in order to serve the future.

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