

Zombie Ideas: policy pendulum and the challenge of effective policymaking

Abstract

Ideas are important as a foundation for public policy, but they can also become ‘zombie ideas’ which survive even though they have been proven to be ineffective. Both the political right and the political left have their own zombie ideas, and when there is a change in government old ideas may return. This article presents the concept of zombie ideas and discusses its relevance for policy in New Zealand.

Keywords policy ideas, zombie ideas, policy pendulum, path dependence, majoritarian politics

When most people think about public policy, they think of laws, or of the money being spent on policies, or perhaps of the organisations responsible for delivering the policy. Those factors are important, but also, behind each policy there is an idea (Béland, 2009). Those ideas may be very general, such as

a commitment to social justice, or they may be more specific, but public policies are manifestations of ideas about what government should do.

Ideas can rarely be a sufficient cause for creating a policy, or for terminating an existing policy. Rather, they require individuals and groups that will advocate

for the idea and act as policy entrepreneurs to attempt to have the idea put into effect. Ideas also represent the interests of groups in society – labour unions, indigenous populations, the wealthy – and those political interests utilise ideas to justify the policies that would give them what they want from government action.

We therefore can think of the politics of public policy as being a clash of ideas. Some important models of policymaking, such as the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier and Weible, 2007), are based on coalitions of actors with different ideas vying to control some domain of policy. Policy entrepreneurship as a source of policies and policy change assumes that those entrepreneurs have ideas, and especially innovative ideas, that will improve the quality of the services being delivered to citizens.

Sometimes, however, policy ideas can be too successful, and can survive long after their utility has passed. Not only do ideas survive in organisations and political groups, but they also continue to be adopted after they have failed, and perhaps failed many times. We call these ‘zombie ideas’ (Peters and Nagel, 2020) – ideas that will not die. We argue that these are more

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prevalent in policy than is sometimes recognised, and that they represent a major challenge to good policymaking.

The concept of zombie ideas

When Liz Truss unveiled her political agenda as UK prime minister in September 2022, many observers probably felt transported back in time. In quasi-*Back to the Future* style, Truss declared that she intended to introduce tax cuts for the rich and businesses, as this would benefit the poorer and less privileged population (Elliott, 2022). This auspicious promise for some is often cited, although there is no data to support the thesis. The policy is well known as trickle-down economics and was introduced in the US and the UK in the late 20th century. However, the policy could not keep its promise and led towards more inequality. It led to the opposite of what it was supposed to achieve. Even though Truss didn't succeed as prime minister and resigned in October 2022, one could ask why ideas that have failed in the past, like trickle-down economics, keep coming up again and keep marching around like zombies.

We call bad ideas like trickle-down economics zombie ideas. Zombie ideas are ideas that 'will not die, no matter how often they are disproved' (Peters and Nagel, 2020). Trickle-down economics is one example of a policy that keeps returning to the policy agenda and, just like a zombie, it appears to be an idea one cannot kill. Bad ideas that don't die can be found in various policy fields, organisations, and within societies, even though we live in a world of evidence-based decision and policymaking.

However, there are not only zombie ideas that continue to be adopted, even though they have been demonstrated to be ineffective. There are ghost ideas as well. Ghost ideas are ideas that have the potential to be effective, yet they haven't been adopted. These ideas are already on the agenda. They 'languish in a policymaking limbo, and are unlikely to ever be adopted and implemented' (ibid.). Ghost ideas are, in many cases, the results of zombie ideas. Sometimes a good idea is not adopted because an old zombie idea is still in place. Zombie ideas can be locked in (Schön, 2010) and can become the

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standard response to policy problems. One ghost idea is gun control in the United States. Whenever there is a mass shooting in the US, some call for national gun control laws and the topic makes it to the political agenda. However, these demands fade, and then find their way back to the agenda right after the next mass shooting. Gun violence cannot be addressed solely at the local or state level, due to the ease of purchasing firearms across state lines. The dynamic behind national gun control is very similar to the survival of zombie ideas. Several factors explain the survival of zombie ideas and the failed attempts to adopt ghost ideas. Before we take a brief look at these factors, we give a few examples of zombie ideas.

Tax cuts produce economic growth

We have already named trickle-down economics as a zombie idea, and it is probably 'the most enduring zombie idea in American politics' (Peters and Nagel,

2020). The basic argument here is that tax cuts for corporations and the rich lead to higher spending, which leads to economic growth. And if the economy grows, then the poor will benefit as well. Basically, the benefits of the prosperous will trickle down and the less prosperous benefit as well. However, as mentioned before, the idea continues to persist despite empirical evidence.

Prohibition as a means of addressing substance abuse

In theory it makes a lot of sense to ban the consumption of a certain toxic product if you don't want people to use it. Toxic products like alcohol or soft drugs such as marijuana cause health and social problems for the people and the state (Schrad, 2010). Banning the consumption, sale and possession of these products should address these problems.

However, the real world is not that easy and if you ban a product, then people will find a way to consume it. In addition, when you keep a soft drug illegal, then it is likely that the product is more expensive. Furthermore, and even worse, soft drugs become interesting for gangs to trade. So, banning soft drugs could lead to more crime. And if you make a product illegal to consume it might be more difficult to help those who became addicted. This was true for the 14-year ban on alcohol consumption in the United States and is true for the use of soft drugs (like marijuana) in many countries today.

Prohibition as a means of addressing substance abuse can be linked to gambling in Germany. Until 2012 the state had a monopoly on remote sports betting and other kinds of gambling. Like alcohol and marijuana, gambling can become an addiction, so the idea here was that it is better to have a controlled offering. However, the state-owned businesses were not allowed to advertise their products and many German consumers used the internet to place their bets with other providers, because they offered better rates. In 2011 the estimated market volume of remote sports betting in Germany was 7 billion euro, yet the turnover of the state-owned company amounted to 185 million euro (Wojtek, 2011). Clearly, the ban wasn't working, despite good intentions.

Transparency

Many times, transparency is promoted as a solution to various concerns in government decision making. When decisions are made openly, this results in more public support and lowers the level of corruption. Some even consider transparency to be a human right. However, transparency might have unexpected consequences because it could increase secrecy. Politicians and officials may use informal ways to negotiate certain policies because they fear public scrutiny. This means that there will be no public record. This is especially crucial when tough decisions need to be made. Maybe politicians opt for the politically safe but substandard policy decision. Here, transparency may undercut its main purposes. Transparency is important, but it should not become the standard response to all problems.

Why do zombie ideas survive?

We have shown that many policy ideas that have little positive impact tend to survive, to survive for long periods of time, and to recur again and again. If we assume governments are attempting to govern well and to provide policy solutions for problems, how are failed ideas able to survive? Several factors support zombie ideas and, therefore, tend to reduce the likelihood that governments will address their policy problems more effectively. Space limitations prevent presentation of all the ideas (see Peters and Nagel, 2020), but the following are some of the more important.

Simple path dependence

The simplest explanation for the persistence of ideas is path dependence, usually associated with historical institutionalism (Sydow, Schreyögg and Koch, 2009). The logic is that an institution, once created, will tend to persist until it is replaced by another, usually through a rather extreme change. Later versions of change within historical institutionalism (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010) identified less dramatic forms of change, in which the institutions – or, in our case, ideas – would be transformed while retaining some elements of the original idea. Or, alternatively, a policy domain may be characterised by several layers of ideas, with older ideas continuing to have some influence despite the presence of newer policy concepts.

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The path dependence argument is especially important for understanding policy ideas that have been successful at some point but later failed. That failure may result from changing politics, or more likely changing socio-economic conditions, whereby a policy idea becomes outmoded. If we adopt Pierson's (2000) arguments about path dependence, some actors in the policy process will have been receiving positive feedback from the idea and will continue to utilise it until sufficient evidence, or political power, accumulates to alter their behaviour. For example, agricultural subsidies in Europe have been criticised for years as being outmoded, but persist because both political elites and agricultural interests receive positive feedback from them.

Beliefs and ideologies

We are discussing the influence of ideas on policymaking, and those ideas and beliefs tend to endure in populations of both

elites and ordinary citizens. Some ideas are embedded in the culture and, therefore, policy proposals that derive from those embedded ideas are more likely to be successful politically, and can be adopted again and again. As well as specific policy beliefs, general ideologies also influence policy choices – for example, the preference for public ownership by socialist political parties, and the contrary belief in the virtues of the market by conservatives.

Beliefs can be especially powerful as political devices if the policy idea can be made analogous to the everyday lives of voters, such as the (largely false) analogy that is made between the household budget and the national budget. Analogies can also be powerful if they link past, well-known events with current policy decisions. For example, that any negotiation with an adversary is appeasement is a belief that persists in many governments, after having helped produce events such as the Vietnam War (Lebow, 2000).

Organisational commitments

Organisations within the public sector also maintain and reuse zombie ideas. These ideas tend to have been successful for them in the past – politically, as policy, or both – and hence they are employed again and again when the organisation is confronted with a policy challenge. Of course, some well-worn ideas continue to work, but we are interested in the persistence of failed ideas. For public sector organisations, these commitments may involve both broad approaches to a problem and the selection of particular policy instruments with which they are familiar.

This failure to learn from policy failures by organisations has several roots. It can be seen as a form of selective amnesia by the organisation (Pollitt, 2000), remembering its values and policy commitments but forgetting its failures. Organisations have values and use those values to train new members and to select responses to policy problems. The socialisation within the organisation perpetuates the ideas and makes it more difficult for the organisation to change.

Politics and power

The first explanation that political scientists might consider for zombie ideas

is politics and power. Ideas are a means of justifying self-interest, and of clothing political power in a more acceptable garb (Hay, 2011). Just as the individual's self-interest may be relatively stable, so too may the ideas that are employed to justify it politically. The zombie ideas that are being used to maintain and enhance political power cannot stand on their own and must have an audience that accepts the logic of the ideas. For example, the various market-based ideas that have been capable of surviving past their normal life span have done so because a significant portion of the American population believes in free market economics, albeit in a somewhat unstudied manner. In particular, the analogy between the economy of the household and that of a nation state has pervaded popular thinking about fiscal policy.

Consensus-based politics in the Low Countries and Scandinavia, as described by Arend Lijphart (2012), might be seen as promoting zombie ideas, given that most parties accept most policies in place and reform is incremental. Paul Krugman (2020) makes the contradictory argument, emphasising the role of division and politicisation in maintaining poor policy ideas. His analysis of contemporary American politics is that the extreme division between right and left has made it possible for comfortable ideas within each camp to persist unchallenged. Further, each of the warring tribes develops its own facts, as well as its own ideas, so that again there is no effective challenge to the persistence of failed ideas.

Blame avoidance

Some argue that policymaking, and governance more generally, is about claiming credit and avoiding blame (Hood, 2011). Political leaders who can plausibly take credit for positive outcomes and can avoid being connected with negative outcomes are likely to be successful. Given that we are focusing on the role of failed policy ideas in government, the possibilities for claiming credit appear limited, making blame avoidance more important. Choosing a policy that has failed previously might appear an unlikely way to avoid blame, but in practice it may not be. If the policy being chosen has been tried

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before, it has to some extent been included in the (notional) list of approved policies for governments. Therefore, choosing such a policy is less dangerous politically than choosing an innovative policy.

The absence of alternatives

Finally, policymakers may readopt a failed policy because they can see no alternative. That failure of vision may be a function of one or another of the factors mentioned above, but can be a powerful tool for narrowing choices and returning to an old policy. Politicians can argue that we need to accept the familiar, if failed, policy because there is nothing else. McConnell

(2020) has argued that when policymakers are confronted with a problem for which they have no solution they will adopt 'placebo policies', simply because they must do something. Zombie ideas are good sources of placebos, given that the idea has been accepted before and appears to be a safe response.

The New Zealand experience

We make no claims to be experts on public policy in New Zealand, but it appears that the government of New Zealand has not been immune to zombie ideas. Like seemingly all governments, it has used policy ideas that will not go away even after they have been proven to be ineffective. Versions of some of the classic examples of zombie policies mentioned above have been found in New Zealand, but there also appears to be a special penchant for policies that, while not necessarily failed, have inherent limits, and have opposites that also have some benefits and costs, producing pendulums that swing back and forth.

Concern with swings of the pendulum in public policy and administration goes back at least to Herbert Simon, who noted that many of the normative recommendations in public policy and public administration came in pairs. Both members of the pair had virtues, but also had vices, so the search for a single right answer to policy and administrative problems has frequently involved going back and forth without ever finding that answer (on coordination versus specialisation, see Bouckaert et al., 2010).

In New Zealand there have been several swings back and forth between centralisation and decentralisation. For example, health care has been moved between centralised and decentralised delivery, with each producing its benefits and costs (Tenbensen, Cumming and Willing, 2023). This and similar reform efforts are indicative of what may be a more general zombie idea (shared by many governments) that changing structures will produce policy results and greater efficiency (Norman and Gill, 2011). However, the commitments of organisations to their own ideas may prevent the adoption of structural change – for example, in border protection.

Again, as is true in many countries, the swings of the policy pendulum have often been a function of the policy ideas and commitments of political parties. While New Zealand is no longer a two-party system, the usual left and right ideas tend to come and go as different parties take control of government. Also, the ruling parties tend to have more control over government and its policies than would be true in many 'consensual democracies'. Each side of that ideological divide continues to advocate their familiar policies, some of which may attain zombie status – for example, nationalisation of economic activities. These differences are often visible in economic policy, but have also occurred in policy areas such as criminal justice (Barretto, Miers and Lambie, 2018).

Suggestions for coping with the pendulum swings in policy, and with them the survival of zombie ideas, have been advanced. The State Services Commission has advocated creating basic policy frameworks that different governments could fine-tune to match their preferences, but which would provide more stable policies and more stable services for citizens (see State Services Commission, Treasury and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014). If adopted, something of this sort would make New Zealand more like the consensual democracies mentioned above. The real trick in this, however, will be finding a framework on which all major actors could agree. Although the majoritarian nature of New Zealand politics has been reduced by electoral reform, there seems to be a continuing pattern of swinging back and forth between options. That some of the same options persist over time, seeming to become at least nascent zombie ideas, remains true after changes in the electoral system.

Points for practice

The concept of zombie ideas has various implications for policymakers and practitioners, operating in the public and the private sphere. It is crucial to understand why certain ideas prevail and how they prevent effective policymaking and may hinder organisational progress.

First, it is important to recognise a zombie idea. Policies and ideas need to be

The challenge for New Zealand and all other governments is not only to identify zombie ideas, but also to develop mechanisms to ensure that policies are based on effectiveness and facts and not on traditions or simple beliefs.

evaluated to determine whether they are zombie ideas. Within an evaluation, various methods can be used: one could develop a survey based on the explanations we introduce in our book. This survey can be circulated within public agencies, ministries, and private and public organisations. Based on the findings, one can interview politicians, public servants, or other organisational members to address the findings, resulting in a thick description of the zombie idea. The zombie idea might stem from ideological beliefs or the influence of organised interests.

It is important to educate the public about the pitfalls of zombie ideas. Some policies prevail because they symbolise a certain idea, and other ghost ideas are not accepted because they would destroy the symbol, like a speed limit on the German autobahn. The Covid-19 pandemic is just

one example of recent crises that highlight this. Fake news, alternative facts and conspiracy theories that have spread widely during the pandemic show how easily zombie ideas may dominate the public discourse. When decisions are no longer based on reality but on fallacies, then zombie ideas will probably survive.

Contexts of policies may change, and a policy that once was good in the past can easily become a zombie in the present. Against this background, it is crucial to monitor policies constantly and to be open to new developments. Policymakers must make sure that their policy is still the most adequate solution for a problem. They have the option of contacting local communities and assessing the effect of their policies. By doing so, policymakers can learn about intended and unintended consequences. Overall, policies within one's jurisdiction should be reviewed. Maybe a change in prioritisation or allocation of resources is needed.

When designing a policy, it may be useful to incorporate agile thinking. Contexts can change and policies need to align with the changing realities. It is important to prepare for different futures and to allow flexibility.

For public sector organisations it is crucial to be aware of the impact of zombie ideas. Take the tragedy of the two NASA space shuttles that crashed. The lives of the astronauts may have been saved if the organisation had addressed false beliefs and questioned its problematic culture. Within public sector organisations, there must be leadership to foster such a reflective culture that allows civil servants to challenge the status quo and to thrive for better performance. This is especially important in times of reforms, such as the digital transformation of the public sector.

Conclusion

The survival of zombie ideas in public policy is not limited to a political system or nation; this fascinating phenomenon can be observed globally. New Zealand, with its essentially majoritarian system, illustrates how policy and zombie ideas live, die and are reanimated. The pendulum swinging between the ideologies leads to diametrically opposed policy opinions. This cyclical swing can also lead to déjà

vu moments, when dead policies are reanimated, and old beliefs return to life under new flags. These pendulum swings in New Zealand show that political change is not always progressive. From time to time political change can also be reactive, and even nostalgic. Furthermore, New Zealand's bureaucracy shows how important it is to be adaptive on the one

hand and to be resilient on the other. Public institutions navigate through complex settings and relabel their approaches, because they must fit the current narrative.

The search for an equilibrium in which policies are both effective and enduring is complex. The challenge for New Zealand and all other governments is not only to identify zombie ideas, but also to develop

mechanisms to ensure that policies are based on effectiveness and facts and not on traditions or simple beliefs. The State Services Commission's suggestion offers an interesting approach to discuss, a future in which policymaking is flexible and consistent at the same time.

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