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Ten Steps in Learning Lessons from Abroad

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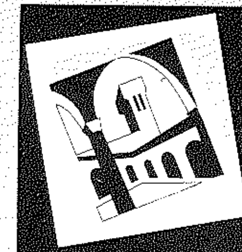

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Ten Steps in Learning Lessons from Abroad

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EUI Working Paper **RSC** No. 2002/5

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The real world in fact is perhaps the most fertile of all sources of good research questions calling for basic scientific inquiry.

Herbert Simon, Nobel lecture (1978)

TEN STEPS IN LEARNING LESSONS FROM ABROAD[1]

Lesson-drawing is practical; it is concerned with making policies that can be put into effect. The point of learning is not to pass an examination; lessons are meant to be tools that guide actions. As long as government proceeds routinely, policymakers may assume that established policies are satisfactory; the guiding maxim is: 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'. But what happens when an increase in dissatisfaction creates a demand to do something?

The simplest response when there is pressure to act is to turn to lessons from the past. Officials reach for a familiar remedy that has worked before. But continuing evidence of dissatisfaction shows that remedies from the last "war" will not win the new "war". Small changes can be made in an existing programme and their consequences evaluated to learn, on a trial-and-error basis, what does and does not dispel dissatisfaction. A trial-and-error strategy is backward-facing, for nothing can be learned until the results of a new programme are evident, In fields such as the reform of secondary education or pensions it can take up to a decade or longer to learn what is and is not effective. But errors cannot readily be undone when large capital investments are sunk in roads, airports, or creating new universities. Moreover, if incremental "patches" of an existing programme are inadequate, dissatisfaction will increase and demands for action intensify.

When old remedies become obsolete, policymakers can look to the future, designing an innovative programme. By definition, the workings of a new programme will be speculative, for it is outside the direct experience of policymakers. There is also no evidence about the cost in terms of money, effort and controversy that will be required to implement a novel programme. Its consequences are also speculative.

Lesson-drawing is future-oriented, drawing on current experience in other countries to improve national policy. It offers an evidence-based alternative to

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[1] This paper is part of a project on How to Draw Lessons: A Guide for Policy Analysis, part of the British ESRC programme on Future Governance. The first draft was prepared while the author was a visiting fellow of the Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute, Florence. The exposition has benefited from presentation at a Cabinet Office Centre for Management and Policy Studies workshop 25 September 2001, and a workshop on Social Policy Reform in China, St. Antony's College, Oxford, 19 October 2001.

developing a new programme. It is evidence-based, since a lesson is based on programmes that have been operating for a long time elsewhere. Attention is focused on the measures that other countries employ to deal with a problem similar to one's own. It is based on experience, albeit the experience of other countries rather than one's own government. In this sense it is similar to the academic study of comparative public policy, which systematically examines how different countries deal with a similar problem in such fields as health, unemployment, transport or whatever. But most studies of comparative public policy are backward-looking, seeking to explain how different countries adopted particular programmes rather than indicating how one's own country can apply this knowledge to improve conditions in the future.

Whereas the past is given, the future is open. Lesson-drawing follows in the tradition of the pioneers of social science, who were both comparative and applied. Aristotle observed differences in the ways states governed themselves in order to arrive at conclusions that would improve the governance of Athens, and Tocqueville examined democracy in America because of he was dissatisfaction with developments in France. In the contemporary world it is far easier than in past centuries to visit other countries and learn from their experiences, both negative and positive. Only a know it all would claim that there is nothing we can learn from "sewers" abroad, just as it is unrealistic to expect to find "one-size-fits-all" measurs that are equally applicable in every country. The critical challenge of lesson-drawing is not whether we can learn anything from what is happening elsewhere, but when, where and how well we learn.

In a world in which every country lived in splendid isolation, lesson-drawing could be dismissed as an idle curiosity, but this is not practical politics for the independent states of the European Union. This paper is practical in intent: it outlines ten steps that must be taken in order to draw lessons from other countries and what to do with what is learned after returning home. An accurate diagnosis of foreign experience does not promise a prescription that will bring satisfaction. Doctors successfully diagnose many diseases without being able to prescribe a sure-fire cure. Lesson-drawing is a tool that can be used in many different contexts and to different ends. It can stimulate a government to adopt a novel programme or lead to the conclusion that what is deemed "best practice" elsewhere cannot or should not be introduced here.

I. LESSON-DRAWING AS CONSTRUCTIVE LEARNING

The policies that concern *la politique politicienne* are usually statements of intent. The intentions of politicians can be more or less plausible, from a proclamation to produce the best national health service in the world to a commitment to do something about a public service that is causing dissatisfaction.

But statements of intent leave open what, specifically, government is to do.

A *programme* specifies the particular means that government adopts to address policy intentions. A programme combines laws and regulations; an organization with officials to administer it; rules to guide the actions of officials; and money to meet costs. Programmes are specific and concrete. For example, the phrase education policy is a category including dozens of specific programmes ranging from pre-school to university education, and special programmes for building schools, training teachers, financing teacher pensions, and so forth. Whereas for historians a programme is a *fait accompli*, for policymakers dealing with demands for action a programme is something they must create.

Here, the term *lesson* refers to a proposed programme for dealing with a problem that makes use of the experience of a programme dealing with the same problem in another country or countries. In policymaking, lessons are not learned by rote or imitation. Just as a doctor must apply classroom lessons to a specific patient, so a policymaker returning from abroad should be able to apply what has been learned to the domestic issue that stimulated the trip. A lesson cannot be simply a description of what another country is doing, for that leaves out the point of the process, applying foreign experience in one's own national context. This is very evident when the conclusion is *not* to follow what another country is doing, the reaction, say, of a Chinese official studying how Russia moved from a planned economy to the market. If a lesson is positive, a lesser or greater amount of adaptation is nonetheless required before it can be imported to take into account differences in administrative institutions and methods of delivering public services between the exporting and importing country. Additional changes are also likely to be needed in order to satisfy the demands of the countries' different political constituencies.

Learners are not passive pupils but policymakers actively trying to formulate or decide about a programme. When a problem erupts, government officials are under pressure to decide what to do and will look for advice to a heterogeneous collection of individuals and groups differing substantially in their attitude toward foreign examples. At one extreme are ostriches, with their heads buried in local sands, oblivious to the rest of the world. At the other extreme are management consultants selling "one size fits all" programmes. There are enthusiasts for a particular country as the source of many good things--the United States, Sweden, or in former days, the Soviet Union. There are also chefs skilled in combining ingredients from different countries into a digestible pick and mix lesson. Expert advisors from outside government are likely to be far more cosmopolitan in their outlook than national civil servants immured in public agencies. Good academics have knowledge and contacts across Europe and

North America, and leading professionals have contact through relevant European or international associations. Interest groups have increasingly developed trans-national links to exchange information and promote common interests in the European Union and beyond. The media will headline interesting proposals and, with an assist from party politicians, encourage the use and abuse of foreign examples as part of domestic political campaigns.

Lesson-drawing involves many steps because it is a process of applying knowledge about a programme in one country to the design of a programme in another. The starting point is that another country has already paid the cost of being first in the field. Lesson-drawing tries to avoid the costs of being first and of re-inventing the wheel by learning from the trials and errors of a programme already in operation. It is an activity requiring professional skills. Just as a civil engineer must exercise professional judgment when deciding how to build a bridge in a specific terrain for a specific purpose, so too policymakers must make professional judgments based on technical knowledge when deciding to what extent a programme elsewhere can be adapted for use at home. Lesson-drawing does not offer a quick technological fix, as the term policy transfer implies. Foreign evidence is used to suggest why a similar programme could or could not be adopted here.
It differs from the spread of big ideas, for example, Keynesianism or, in reaction monetarism, because it focuses on concrete programme instruments necessary to implement these ideas. As both Keynesians and monetarists have learned, the devil in applying ideas is often in the details of programmes. Whereas studies of diffusion describe the sequence in which the same policy issue arises on the agenda of officials in different places, lesson-drawing is about the content of the programmes that are adopted in response.

Many policy advisors act as if programmes were completely fungible: what works is one country is expected to work everywhere. Economists are particularly prone to this assumption. Lawrence Summers, chief economist at the World Bank when the market was introduced in post-Communist countries, has asserted, '*Respect the universal laws of economics*', and Steve Hanke, a consultant on monetarist programmes, applies his faith in fungibility on many continents, saying, 'I tell everyone the same thing' (quoted in Rose, 1993: 35f; see also Jacoby, 1999). Tax policies are treated as if they would work the same in Sweden and Russia, just as the parts for a Ford automobile are expected to work the same in Scotland or Spain. Idealistic reform-mongers want every country to adopt the "best practice" programme, defined as the programme of the country most successful in minimizing inflation, unemployment or whatever the object at hand. Universalistic solutions mistakenly assume that every country has the institutional as well as the financial resources to adopt a given programme, and that every national government wants the same things.

Alternatively, historical and contextual approaches to policymaking emphasize nation-specific features of a programme. The greater the emphasis given influences from the past as the dominant force affecting future national developments, the greater the barrier raised to applying lessons from abroad. Contextual analysis implies that nothing that works in one country is likely to be effective in another context. From such perspectives, the critical point about British and French programmes for dealing with a common problem is that one is British and embedded in British society, while the other is French and for that reason could only flourish in France. Both total fungibility and total blockage are familiar arguments. They are also contradictory.

Lesson-drawing is about contingencies: *under what circumstances and to what extent will a programme that works there also work here?* It is about specifying ways of learning from foreign experience in order to develop a programme that can better deal with a domestic problem. The contingent nature of lesson-drawing specifies whether obstacles are variable (e.g. the economic priorities of the government of the day) or long-term (e.g. federal as against unitary institutions). It encourages policymakers to be sceptical about assuming that so-called "best practice" policies can readily be adopted, but it also encourages scepticism about arguments that what is done there can never happen here. Japan's success in learning from the West is an example of national policymakers responding successfully when foreign force imposes the need to open up a country to international influences. In the late nineteenth-century officials were sent abroad to study how to operate everything from a postal service (Britain) to agricultural college (the United States). Initially, the Japanese looked to France for lessons about creating a modern army, but after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, they turned for lessons to Berlin (see Westney, 1987).

Desirability does not guarantee practicality. The desire of many developing countries to achieve a Scandinavian standard of living does not mean that this can be done simply by enacting Nordic welfare state legislation and accession to the European Union will not enable new member states to recover over night from the negative consequences of two generations of a Soviet-style command economy. Likewise, feasibility does not imply desirability. Many different types of electoral system can be employed in a modern democracy. The debate about electoral reform in Britain has literally led policymakers to the antipodes to study how alternative electoral systems work. However, the decision about whether or not to apply the lessons that can be drawn is not a technical matter but a question of political values and interests.

II. LEARNING HOW IT WORKS THERE

Lesson-drawing is scientific in the original sense of the Latin root, *scientia,* to know or to understand things. Understanding is arrived at through a process of empirical observation. This makes lesson-drawing akin to medicine rather than economics. In economics, policy prescription proceeds deductively from axioms that are given. In medicine, symptoms must first be observed before a diagnosis is made that draws on systematic, evidence-based theories. As in medical diagnosis, lesson-drawing procedures can be simplified in a check list of necessary steps. As in professions such as law, civil engineering or painting, moving from observation to diagnosis is not about theories in the abstract; it is an applied art that requires the application of skills to an actual and often complex problem.

1. Diagnose your problem.

There is no point in looking abroad for a remedy if you don't know what the problem is at home. If dissatisfaction is diagnosed as caused by a short-lived media event, then the media will focus on another, unrelated issue before foreign travel can be organized. If an individual politician or group is diagnosed as stirring up trouble, they might be diverted with flattery or co-opted to participate in a broad-ranging policy review in return for political good behaviour. None of these responses requires contact with foreigners.

When political dissatisfaction is high, and especially if it is unexpected, there is often confusion about what exactly the problem is. The outbreak of the foot-and-mouth epidemic early in 2001 illustrates the point. Immediately and narrowly, the problem could be diagnosed as requiring a medical means to prevent the spread of the disease, a diagnosis that implies looking at animal health programmes in other countries. From a longer-term perspective, the problem could be diagnosed as the need to prevent the outbreak of another epidemic, directing attention at programmes for inspecting animal health on farms and economic measures that have encouraged transporting cattle longer distances to bigger markets where epidemics can spread more widely. From a longest time horizon, the problem could be diagnosed as about the economy of the countryside. If rural areas are thought to be overly dependent on heavily subsidized animal husbandry, then rural economic development programmes are more relevant than animal health measures.

When there is broad political agreement about the goals of public policy, policymakers examine alternative means to an agreed end. For example, if there is a rise in automobile accidents, there will be general agreement that accidents ought to be reduced, and a search can concentrate on finding a programme that will be more effective in doing so. Yet this does not preclude political conflict,

since there can be disagreement about what programme is most desirable, for example whether it is better to follow country X that has reduced road accidents by imposing speed limits on motorists or country Y that has reduced road accidents by shifting public expenditure from roads to rail transport and reducing the number of miles that motorists drive.

When disputes arise about political goals, lesson-drawing is a tool that can be wielded by opposing sides. For an issue such as abortion, those in favour can use specific details of abortion programmes in other countries to learn how it can best be made most freely available at home. But the demonstration that abortion programmes are feasible will not change the mind of those opposed to abortion on principle. Anti-abortion campaigners can turn to pro-natalist programmes in other countries or programmes providing assistance for parents with large families to deal with problems arising from higher birth rates in the absence of legalized abortion.

2. Where to look for a lesson.

In the course of a year, a government department is likely to face some problems that arise unexpectedly and some that have been simmering for years. When pressures for prompt action are acute, there is no time to scan systematically what is happening in other countries or even within different departments of the same national government. The first priority is to get consensus among the maximum number of affected organizations outside as well as inside government. A few random phone calls may be made or a quick search made of the WWW, but in the absence of contextual knowledge about a foreign country, which is usually lacking in national policymakers, the information gleaned is likely to be so incomplete that it can only be used for rhetorical purposes or dismissed. To make a long-term programme commitment without investigating why a crisis arose is at best a leap in the dark and risks subsequent regrets. Urgent problems can often be met by gestures that buy time, for example, appropriating a fixed sum of money to deal with an emergency or announcing the appointment of a task force or committee to deliberate about what should be done.

When a problem arises after simmering for a long time, or when a crisis is resolved by the announcement that deliberations are in hand, there is time to travel abroad in search of lessons. The potential value of learning from the achievements and mistakes of other countries is much increased too. Money is no excuse, for if a business can send a salesperson abroad in search of contracts worth a million, then public officials should be financed to go abroad when hundreds of millions are at stake in a programme. The press of work in the department, while true, is a statement about priorities that implies the marginal advantage of one more civil servant reading one more file or sitting in a

committee with five other persons who have been discussing the same ideas for many weeks is greater than the marginal value of examining the same problem from the fresh perspective of those who appear to have different thoughts, and often a higher degree of satisfaction.

Plenty of countries offer evidence to policymakers looking for programmes that produce political satisfaction. Even when there are trans-national causes of a problem, such as an oil price rise or a world recession, dissatisfaction will be much less in some countries than others, implying that programmes of the former are better. When selecting a country to learn from, the following points are relevant:

- *Ideological compatibility.* There is little point in social democratic policymakers looking for lessons from a country governed by adherents of free enterprise, for even if programme means are found to be transferable, programme goals may be unacceptable. Although British Blairites may continue to feel psychologically at home in the United States, since George W. Bush's arrival at the White House they are less likely to feel politically at home there, and the ad hoc agreement between two national leaders in the war against terrorists in Afghanistan is unlikely to spill over into domestic programmes.

- *Similarities in resources.* All programmes have price tags, measured in money, in personnel, and in organizational capacity. Rich countries do not look to poor countries for lessons, for it is assumed that their far greater resources enable them to do much better than low income countries. However, the opposite is often not true. International aid agencies and intergovernmental bodies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund may recommend first-world programmes as best practice measures that developing countries ought to adopt. Economists are particularly likely to assume, without empirical verification, that the "failure" of real world countries to meet the textbook qualification about all other conditions remaining equal will not cause the failure of programmes they endorse.

- *Psychological, not geographical proximity.* Since national histories and cultures influence both institutions and political values, policymakers should look for lessons in countries where they and their colleagues feel comfortable. While London is geographically closer to France and Ireland than to the United States or Australia, the latter are psychologically closer. Likewise, Australians prefer to look to America or Europe for lessons rather than to neighbours in Indonesia. In post-Communist countries, policymakers are more likely to look to European Union countries than to close neighbours with similar legacies. Scandinavian countries, historically integrated under different

crowns, are unusual in combining psychological and geographical proximity.

- *Availability of evidence.* Every government publishes copious documents about its programmes, but language is a practical barrier to access. As English has become the lingua franca of international policymakers and of social science, a surprisingly large number of national governments now publish summary information in English, and senior officials are usually fluent English-speakers, especially in the smaller countries that constitute the majority of member states in the European Union and OECD. In short, British and American policymakers can no longer use their limited linguistic capacity as a reason for ignoring what happens elsewhere in a world in which most policymakers are English speakers too.

- *Interdependence.* An increasing number of national programmes are interdependent, depending not only on what one national government does but also what is done by other countries that influence the outcome. Interdependence is great in such fields as central banking, military defence and tourism, but it also spreads into environmental issues, industrial matters affected by exports or imports, and efforts are being made to expand the concept to cover national labour standards too. Interdependence is a force pushing national policymakers to pay attention to what other countries are doing, and those in smaller countries are often predisposed to assume that larger countries are better able to develop new programmes than they are. The European Union is increasing interdependence among member states. Where interdependence exists, policymakers need to monitor programmes for reasons of self-defence as well as lesson-drawing for, as former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau noted, having the United States as a neighbour is like being in bed with an elephant.

3. **Investigating how a programme works there.**

Papers with laws, organization charts, budgets and quantitative indicators about services delivered and recipients are necessary but not sufficient. To understand how a programme works in another country it is necessary to go there in order to learn what printed documents leave out. The cost is far less than sending a BBC camera team abroad to produce a 10-minute television segment that may stimulate chatter but is an inadequate basis for making policy. Investigating a programme on the ground enables a visitor to see how it looks from the inside rather than from a distance.

The basic strategy of a visitor should be to divide and learn. A visitor can put the same questions to different people involved in it and compare their answers to see how widespread is satisfaction with a programme and what criticisms may be made from different perspectives. A traveller is well advised to

assume that, just as there are disagreements about programmes at home, there are also likely to be differences of opinion abroad, even if what is regarded as unsatisfactory there may be regarded as desirable from the traveller's home base.

- *Foot-soldiers of service delivery.* A national programme may look different from the "under all" position of a classroom teacher, a doctor or a policeman than from a ministry. People who deliver education, health or anti-crime strategies not only see the effects of programmes on their intended targets but also have a bottom up view of deficiencies, and what may be done to improve programmes that the top views as running satisfactorily

- *High-ranking officials responsible for a programme.* From the top of a government department one can gain an understanding of political interests supporting a programme; resource commitments; and an awareness of perceived shortcomings that may lead to amendments (or even the abandonment) of the current programme.

- *Experts and commentators.* University-based experts should have a wealth of knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of a national programme, and familiarity with other countries. Journalistic commentators should have a wealth of knowledge about the personalities and politics associated with a programme, and insights into strengths and weaknesses that may not show up in statistical data.

- *Programme recipients.* The interests of recipients are just as real as the interests of officials delivering it--but they are also different. When programmes target organizations (whether business associations or other agencies of government) the people to see can readily be identified *ex officio.* When a programme addresses specific categories of individuals, for example, the disabled or the unemployed, contact can be combined with meeting foot-soldiers in service delivery and experts.

- *Reformers and critics.* A programme that generates broad satisfaction can nonetheless have shortcomings. The question to ask of critics is whether they are demanding more resources to enhance the existing programme; reforms to promote greater effectiveness in reaching agreed goals; or whether critics want to replace the existing programme with another.

Comparing information from interviewing diverse stakeholders will give a foreign visitor a sense of whether there really is widespread satisfaction with a programme; what its shortcomings are thought to be; and what changes are being considered in a programme that from afar appears satisfactory.

4. Abstracting a cause-and-effect model for export.

A model outlines in generic terms the elements of a programme necessary to make it operate; it is thus the opposite of a historical or journalistic description chronicling details of many activities past and present. Abstraction is particularly important in working across languages, for it identifies what is common in many countries. In lesson-drawing, the critical feature of the British Inland Revenue or the American Internal Revenue Service is not that they are located in different countries but that they are tax-collection agencies. Abstraction focuses attention on essentials and avoids overdetermination. It shows how an automobile engine works and avoids the pretence that the marque on a Ford or Fiat is integral to the engine.

Reverse engineering shows how manufacturers in developing countries can draw lessons from abroad. A manufacturer takes a product already in production elsewhere, say, a well known manufacturer's computer, and makes a model of how it works. The basic elements of the model are then used to design a computer that the manufacturer can produce, with the machine adapted to local conditions and its target audience, and modified sufficiently to be defensible against claims of breach of patents and intellectual property rights.

A model is more than a catalogue or check list of programme requirements; it also identifies cause-and-effect relationships necessary to convert a vague policy intention into deliverable outputs of a programme. Models are familiar in engineering. For example, a model of a laptop computer represents basic elements of a laptop--the power supply, the keyboard, the screen, processors, etc.--found in every computer. The fundamental difference between a lesson-drawing model and an economic model is that the former is abstracted from an actual programme whereas an economic model can be produced by deductions from pure theory. A lesson-drawing model is therefore about what is; its content is not determined by reasoning from "landless" axioms but by contextual observation. To be accurate it must be capable of reference back to the context from which it is abstracted.

A lesson-drawing model must include everything necessary to make a programme work--and leave out everything that is non-essential. "Thick" descriptions with many pages of descriptive prose are likely to include much that is non-essential. To describe how a programme works, a model must identify:

- Rules for action set out in laws and regulations, for example, criteria for determining eligibility for benefits in a social security programme.

- Administrative requirements for delivering the programme.

- Personnel requirements: specialists, e.g. flight controllers or doctors, or generalists, whether secretaries, computer programmers or auditors, etc.

- Money, whether from general tax revenue, ear-marked taxes, user charges or other sources.

- Programme recipients, whether individuals (mothers, students, consumers) or organizations (hospitals, universities, or even other government agencies).

Because a model is designed to be portable, it should follow the principle of Occam's razor, omitting everything that is not essential, such as:

- History. Evolutionary detail relevant within a national context can obscure what is important for cross-national learning. The critical historical point is obvious: Has the programme been operating long enough so that its effects can be examined? The rapid dissemination of fads through international media makes it necessary to check this point, otherwise, a presidential proposal to the United States Congress or a new law can be treated as if had already provided the evidence for empirical evaluation.

- Cultural values. The culturalist argument--Folkways create stateways---can be reversed. Programmes based on lessons from abroad can change folkways, as the 1949 German Federal Constitution illustrates. If cultural values influence elements of a programme, these elements should be identified. Cross-cultural differences are relevant to a country wanting to import a programme.

III WHAT SHOULD OR COULD BE APPLIED HERE?

Applying foreign experience to one's own country is a dialectical process. The initial model is not the final model. It can jump start designing a new programme by emphasizing what that must include, but this is not the end of a process of learning.

5. Designing a lesson

Programmes are designed rather than given, and design is an art requiring judgement and skill. Whereas assembling a computer or a car engine may require following every step in a model exactly, the models used in programme design are products of "fuzzy logic" that tolerate a degree of variability. As Herbert Simon (1969: 54) has remarked: "Design is the core of all professional training; it is the principal mark that distinguishes the professions from the sciences". The professions include policy analysis and public finance, as well as medicine and

the law. Professionals develop skills in designing policies through formal education and by learning from on-the-job experience. Professionals demonstrate their skills by diagnosing specific problems in the light of general principles, and then making recommendations for action. A correspondence between the model of foreign practice and a lesson drawn for domestic use is variable, depending on whether the lesson is an adaptation, a hybrid or a synthesis of models, or inspired by learning from abroad.

The *adaptation* of the model to the circumstances of the importing nation is the simplest form of lesson-drawing. Whereas the model was created by stripping out the specifics of the exporting nation, to apply the model requires writing in specific details concerning the laws, personnel, and administrative requirements of the importing country. Adaptation involves a close, point to point correspondence between the original source and the programme based on it, but it does not require that they be identical, nor is it realistic to assume that any programme can be copied without any adaptation. The closer the correspondence to the experience of the exporting country, the greater the extent to which the lesson is evidence based.

A lesson may take the form of a *hybrid* combining compatible elements of programmes in effect in two or more countries. For example, if policymakers in a federal system want to draw a lesson from a country with a unitary form of government, then the delivery system may follow the model of the latter while the method of finance may be based on the importing country's own standard operating procedures. All the elements in a hybrid programme can thus be observed in action, albeit in different places.

A lesson can be a *synthesis*, combining in a distinctive way elements familiar in similar programmes in different countries. The logic is that of anatomy, for each human figure is a unique combination of many familiar parts. For example, when new democracies of post-Communist Europe were abruptly challenged to produce new laws of electoral competition, policymakers did not try to create new elements for each step in the electoral process. Instead, new electoral laws were written that synthesized elements from electoral laws in place in one or more West European countries and elements from their own pre-Communist or Communist past.

Travel abroad can stimulate the design of a new programme, but *inspiration* should not ignore analysis. If there are identifiable links between the foreign model and the freshly inspired programme, then it can be considered the most artful and loosest form of lesson-drawing. However, if such correspondences cannot be found, then whatever its merits, the new proposal is based on pure speculation lacking a basis in counterparts elsewhere.

6. Should it be imported?

Every lesson is subject to a double veto: it should be both desirable and practical. Technical experts can make a judgment about whether a programme would operate at home as well as abroad, but they lack the authority and legitimacy conferred by elective office. In appraising lessons from abroad, the first concern of elected officials is not the technical feasibility of a programme but whether its normative goals are acceptable to the government of the day. The greater the cultural difference between the source of a lesson and the intended importer, the more likely it is that ideological values may be a stumbling block and within OECD countries differences between liberal and social market values can be obstacles to importing lessons. Politicians will only endorse a lesson if it is congenial or, at least, not uncongenial to their views of what government ought and ought not to do.

Political values are often intertwined with political interests. For example, when politicians debate the pros and cons of electoral reform, they may invoke democratic values but the conclusions drawn are likely to reflect partisan calculations of interest too. Political interests are found within government departments too. The practice of federal countries such as Switzerland, Germany and the United States demonstrates that it is technically feasible for local or regional assemblies to have taxing powers without making their economy worse off than Britain, but the British Treasury has successfully resisted devolving revenue-raising powers because it wants to control virtually the whole of public revenue.

7. Resource requirements and constraints

Every programme involves a mixture of laws, personnel and financial resources, but the importance of each element differs greatly between programmes. Programmes concerning marriage and divorce are law-intensive; pension programmes cost a lot of money but require relatively few employees; while health and education programmes tend to be both labour-intensive and money-intensive. The resource requirement of the average programme is usually much less than the average error in the Treasury forecast of annual tax revenue or of the Gross Domestic Product, but at the margin the demands for new public expenditure are usually greater than discretionary income. The current economic climate favours drawing "cheap" lessons depending primarily on the law for their effect, or new public management programmes that promise to reduce public expenditure.

Common sense in the choice of countries as sources of lessons can screen 4out obvious resource obstacles. There is no point in a poor developing country seeking to apply a programme that requires the money of a rich OECD country. Instead of looking to contemporary Scandinavia, developing countries might be better advised to study how they maintained welfare in the nineteenth century when Scandinavian countries were poor and rural. In many parts of the Commonwealth, the problems facing poor countries are more like those of pre-industrial England than of England in a post-industrial era. Money is not the only obstacle to applying lessons. For example, British efforts to emulate German success in giving vocational skills to the majority of young employees has been hamstrung by the absence of German-style *meisters* to provide on-the-job training (Rose and Wignanek, 1990).

Logically, there are four ways of combining technical appraisals with political evaluations of desirability (Table 1). Two are very straightforward. If the lesson drawn is deemed desirable by politicians and practicable by experts, then it is doubly attractive. Equally, a program is doubly undesirable if it is considered undesirable by politicians and likely to fail if an attempt is made to put it into effect. Conflict arises when politicians are attracted to importing a program that is successful elsewhere, but likely to fail if put into effect here. As in Greek mythology, such a programme is a siren call, attractive from afar but threatening shipwreck if it is adopted on grounds of desirability without regard to practicality. The veto of a lesson that is technically practical but inconsistent with the values and interests of the government can be frustrating to its proponents but it does not cause programme failure, since no action is taken.

DESIRABILITY AND PRACTICALITY OF A LESSON

	Programme desirability	
Practicality	High	Low
High	Doubly attractive	Unwanted technical solution
Low	Siren call	Doubly rejected

The veto that political values and interests impose is important at the moment, but the maxim 'Never say never in politics' is a reminder that it need not be a permanent ban on applying a lesson. During the a single term of office, external pressures may turn what was once politically impossible into an overriding

political goal, as U-turns of British government on economic policy illustrate. For example, if a rise in inflation makes it the first priority of government, then anti-inflationary programmes previously rejected as threatening unemployment may suddenly become politically acceptable. Even the strongest and most opinionated of leaders sooner or later loses office. When a new government takes office, what was once rejected out of hand may become a new priority.

8. The problem of context

To recommend that one country emulate or catch up with another's success simply by copying or transferring a programme wholesale is naive, because it ignores the way in which national context influences how a programme can operate, and whether it may be effective. Social scientists are not like aeronautical engineers, who assume that principles of aerodynamics are the same around the world, or medical doctors who apply the same clinical treatment to patients wherever they are. However, epidemiologists concentrate on contextual variations in the incidence of diseases, contextual differences that have implications for what treatments can be applied. Policymaking is more akin to epidemiology than to aeronautical engineering.

In an era of big government most areas of public policy are "brown field" sites, already occupied by programmes and public agencies that have been built up piecemeal over half century or even a century. This creates a "wicked context" problem, because any new programme must fit into a matrix of established programmes. As long as established national programmes are not causing dissatisfaction, there is no pressure for existing programmes to change in order to accommodate a new lesson. The interdependence of programmes can make the attempt to introduce a single lesson a "wicked issue" problem, because changing one programme is insufficient for success. For example, importing a European vocational training programme to the United States will not bring young American workers up to European standards unless American secondary schools improve the education of their average pupils sufficiently so that they can benefit from high-level vocational training.

Because every programme needs to be anchored within institutions of government, a lesson cannot be imported if there is no institution that can implement it. The eruption of a novel problem such as HIV-AIDS creates an imperative pressure for public officials to find an institutional home for new programmes. One option is to create a completely new public agency on a "green field" site to deal with it, and the institution as well as its programmes may be based on lessons from abroad. To avoid delays involved in setting up a new agency a new programme can be added to an existing agency's portfolio of responsibilities. But this is not always possible. For example, officials of the US

Department of Education may want to import a French programme for testing national educational standards, but any attempt to do so would be effectively blocked by the 50 state departments of education and thousands of local school boards responsible for making and administering education programmes.

9. Bounding speculation through prospective evaluation

Conventional evaluation research is retrospective, applying social science analytic tools to the examination of evidence produced by a programme that has been in effect for several years. The limitation of conventional evaluation research is that it is backward facing, producing too much information too late. The primary demand of policymakers is not for after-the-fact evaluation but for *before-the-fact* assessments that indicate whether a proposed programme will increase or decrease satisfaction. There is, of course, a significant degree of uncertainty in any prospective evaluation, but when political dissatisfaction is rising, doing nothing can be even riskier.

Any prescription for action is necessarily speculative since it is 'about the future, and evidence is about the past' (Rip, 2001: 96). A lesson uses evidence about what has happened in one country's programme in the past to formulate hypotheses about how it will work here in future. In this way, the inevitable element of speculation is bounded by empirical observation of an existing programme. Prospective evaluation is thus a form of vicarious learning, with a firmer grounding in evidence than "unbounded" speculations about effects for which there is no evidence from the national past or another country's present. Relating evaluation to a cause-and-effect model provides a transparent basis for justifying conclusions, and invites critics to be explicit about their reasons for holding different views. It thus avoids an iterative repetition of assertions and counter-assertions.

Prospective evaluation is routinely used in tax policy. When a modification is proposed in an existing tax, the future effects of the change on public revenue are calculated by reference to what has happened in the past. The annual budget statement of the Chancellor of the Exchequer is full of prospective evaluations of the effects of tax changes. For example, the impact of an increase in tobacco tax on public revenue is calculated as a function of the new tax rate, changes in the amount of tobacco consumed and smuggling from lower tax jurisdictions.

Prospective evaluation can be a means of accident prevention, reducing the number of mistakes and faults likely to be found in a new programme. Whereas retrospective evaluation identifies failings that cannot be undone, prospective evaluation gives warning of what to avoid. Making a cause-and-effect model of a programme is a discipline testing whether a lesson has been thought through

sufficiently so that it can be implemented. Insofar as shortcomings are identified, anticipation can lead to improvements in implementation. Insofar as prospective evaluation calls attention to costs and risks that had previously been ignored, it can lead to the conclusion that a lesson appearing attractive on first sight because of its association with success elsewhere is not worth importing here.

IV MARKETING LESSONS: FROM POLICY TO POLITICS

If evaluation indicates that a lesson can be applied, politics takes over from policy analysis. Whereas policy analysis is about the careful linkage of cause and effect, political rhetoric is about the convincing association of ideas and symbols. To market a lesson, proponents must tell a story that is attractive and compelling, claiming benefits that may go well beyond anything that could be justified by prospective evaluation. Since claims are about future benefits, opponents cannot disprove what is said. Political strategies to secure adoption of a lesson are much the same as for domestically inspired proposals with one significant exception: the proposal can be associated with a foreign country.

The protean character of symbols makes them useful weapons in political controversy. Policymakers have always been quick to invoke "lessons" from the national past when suits their political convenience, but past events are often political symbols used 'for advocacy or for comfort' (Neustadt and May, 1986: xii). Invoking the name of another country is also an exercise in symbol manipulation; foreign countries can be used as ammunition in a debate dominated by power and interests rather than a search for knowledge. In an effort to discredit a proposal opponents will cite many things associated with its country of origin, from its food or its sluggish economy to failure in football competitions.

10. Foreign countries as positive or negative symbols

If a programme is derived from the experience of a country perceived as more successful than one's own, for example, Germany in relation to its East European neighbours, this increases the attractiveness of a lesson independent of its intrinsic merits. In marketing terms, one is selling "the sizzle" not the steak, that is, an attraction unrelated to a programme's substance, The attractiveness of countries varies between policy areas. For most of the postwar era Germany was positively associated with successful anti-inflation policies, while its policies about citizenship and immigrants have been viewed sceptically. A change in party government can also change the attractiveness of a foreign exemplar. The United States was specially attractive to the European right but not to social democrats when Ronald Reagan was president; the positions were reversed when Bill Clinton entered the White House. There are also cross-cultural differences in attraction. Whatever the policy area the United States is usually positively valued

in Britain and negatively valued in France.

The first line of attack on a lesson from abroad is always true: this proposal is un-British, or un-American or whatever. The propensity of a national political class to distrust foreigners is a variable: it tends to be greater in the United States than in member states of the European Union, where there are many pressures to take foreign practices into account. The pressures to learn from foreign experience is even more strongly felt by countries negotiating entry to the Europe Union, for they must be prepared to adapt national programmes in many different fields to meet the requirements of the *acquis communitaire* (cf. Jacoby, 1999).

There are also differences within countries. The British tabloid press is much more xenophobe while the media read by policymakers, for example, *The Financial Times* or *The Economist*, is internationalist. To discredit a programme it is necessary to associate it with an undesirable foreign country or practice, e.g. describing an immigration restriction as a fascist measure, or to claim that a programme based on an American example will lead to the "McDonaldization" of a country, a claim that reveals the division between elites who patronize McDonalds in the negative sense, and ordinary citizens who patronize McDonalds in the positive sense (cf. Watson, 1997).

National pride is normally high, but when there is dissatisfaction with a particular national policy it is insufficient to argue that one's own country is always best. More generally, Tony Blair's demand for creating a 'new Britain' presupposes that policymakers should not regard past or present policies as good enough, Blair's will to believe that change is possible, a confidence shared with Margaret Thatcher, makes it unacceptable to argue that Britain lacks the skill and resources to introduce new programmes, whatever their origins. By acting on the assumption that what works there will work here, entrepreneurs have made fortunes in Britain by acquiring franchisees for things as varied as Xerox photocopiers, Coca Cola and commercial television.

Since public policy is not static, any lesson that is put into practice will have unforeseen consequences. These consequences are likely to be greater than for incremental changes in established national programmes. When this happens, the process of lesson-drawing has come full circle. It starts with examining current activities in another country to make plans about one's own future. It concludes when a lesson has been in effect long enough here so that it can be evaluated and modified on the basis of one's own national experience.

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