

BACK TO THE SEVENTIES? INACTION, POWER AND THE QUALITY OF GOVERNMENT

Paul 't Hart

1 THE OTHER LEO HUBERTS

It may come as a surprise to international scholars that Leo Huberts has had other intellectual pursuits than values, ethics, integrity, corruption and quality in government (and one of its pivotal institutions, the police). These have been the main research focus for a long time, and the theme of nearly all of his published work as it appears on his *Vrije Universiteit* website. But before he got into the 'integrity business', he was a student of political power. Much of that early work was in Dutch and was thus inaccessible to English-speaking audiences (only Huberts, 1989). This is their loss, as I consider his work on power and how it can be studied as being among his very best.

Let me give you a potted history. Leo trained as a political scientist in the 1970s at the then reputedly 'Red' political science programme of the Catholic University of Nijmegen. Not surprisingly, the issue of social and political power featured prominently in both the curriculum and the 'extracurricular environment', to use a nonce phrase. He then joined a group of political sociologists at Leiden University who were interested in the political impact of the then budding social movements – environmental, anti-nuclear, urban squatters, under the aegis of the aptly named Centre for the Study of Social Conflict. His PhD dissertation, 1988, analysed the influence of public protests and grassroots pressure on government decision-making about the construction and expansion of highways (Huberts, 1988). In it he presented an innovative method for studying political influence, which he termed 'intensive process analysis'. It was designed to sidestep some of the pivotal limitations of the so-called decisional method of power analysis advocated by pluralists such as Dahl (1961) and of the 'process method' of establishing patterns of influence in dyadic relations between policy actors developed by Dutch sociologist Braam (1975). Intensive process analysis entailed the meticulous tracking of who influenced whose arguments and positions in the complex multi-actor processes leading up to major government policy decisions.

In 1994 he consolidated this work by co-editing an exceedingly helpful volume in which all presently known methods for tracking and explaining political influence were juxtaposed and assessed (Huberts and Kleinjehuis, 1994). Finally, Klarfje Peters, the very first in the long line of PhD students Leo supervised to completion, applied intensive process analysis to study a wide range of Dutch policy processes and went on to win the best dissertation prize of the Dutch Political Science Association for it (Peters, 1999).

So far so good. And then Leo got 'sidetracked' by his interest in integrity and ethics in government. In the process, the conceptual apparatus of power and influence largely gave way to the language of values. One can only wonder what could have happened had he applied his original toolkit to his new area of interest. What follows here should be read as an exercise in seduction – an attempt to arouse Leo into spending at least some of all that time he now has at his disposal to return to his first academic love and invite him to draw on it to further nourish his second.

2 THE PUZZLE OF GOVERNMENT INACTION

Though it was a significant improvement upon the existing range of techniques for making political power visible and assessable, it shares with its precursors one important bias – it remains focused on 'decisions' as the unit of analysis. In other words, it can help us 'see power' in and around instances where governments end up 'doing something', but it cannot help us in understanding how power may affect governments 'doing nothing'.

This is an important limitation. 'Why doesn't the government do something about this?' is an oft-voiced complaint in legislatures, TV debates, opinion pieces, letters to the editor and on the Internet. And so is its retrospective corollary, 'why *didn't* the government do something about this?', for example in the wake of a major emergency or following penetrating reports or news coverage of how wicked problems such as domestic violence, mass migration or climate change are inflicting damage and making victims. In principle, we should be able to understand the nature of such 'doing nothing', but the overlapping fields of political science, public administration and public policy have displayed remarkably little appetite for doing so. Their attention and their methodologies have been largely focused on studying political *events, conflicts, decisions* and *overt activity* to the virtual neglect of non-events, silences, non-decisions and apparent inactivity.

It was not always thus. In the 1960s and 1970s, 'critical' political scientists started wondering what power was at work in *preventing* certain dissatisfaction, grievances and desires among sections of the public from being 'converted' into public policy (Bachrach and Baratz, 1963; Crenston, 1971). These scholars caught the mood of the era by coining the term 'non-decisions' and point towards power differentials between actors as well as systemic biases working towards preventing certain grievances and ideas from being aired, politicized and shaping government

policy. Saunders (1979) later presented a three-step 'nondecision-making filter' distinguishing between (not-formulated) grievances, (not-articulated) demands and (non-)resolution of demands after Lukes (1974) had consolidated the power debates of the era into his famous 'three faces of power':

- the power to influence political decisions (and thus also limiting consideration of certain policy options)
- the power to control the political agenda (and thus also to block issues from achieving priority attention)
- the power to frame the public discourse (and thus also to stop certain social conditions from being framed as salient problems that require collective action).

Focusing on the role of actors and agency in the production of inaction, Frey (1971) defined non-issues in terms of active efforts by some actors to deter other actors from even attempting to exert influence. 'These efforts can take many forms, from appeals to supposed shared norms and values – later termed a 'logic of appropriateness' by March and Olsen (1989) – to deals and bargains right down to more coercive means. Likewise, Cobb and Elder's (1971) agenda-building model emphasized the importance of 'gatekeeping' and demonstrating that certain actors are able to determine what issues or proposals will not reach the political/governmental agenda – who's 'in' and who's 'out' and the role of gatekeeping in determining that are also considered pivotal in studies on the composition and dynamics of communication and policy networks (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Nahon, 2011). Many years later, Cobb and Ross (1997) followed with the concept of 'agenda denial', where elites use cultural strategies to avoid, marginalize and redefine issues, while Dowding (1996) urged political scientists to always apply the 'who benefits' test when seeking to uncover how power operates.

These contributions from critical political science temporarily trained the attention of policy analysis to 'silences' in policy discourse and 'inaction' in policymaking as significant phenomena amenable to analysis and evaluation. The momentum of the early 1970s faded, however, and, at least in the fields of public administration and policy analysis, the scholarly mainstream turned its attention to programme design, policy instruments, service delivery – the 'tools of government' – and the actors and networks driving these activities. Also, since contemporary governments inherit a massive amount of pre-existing policies and programmes from the many decades worth of governments that came before them, any inaction on their part is not so much about not initiating new government activities but about not terminating or not changing existing ones (Rose and Davies, 1993).

Perhaps the ontological and epistemological puzzles raised by notions such as 'non-decisions', 'non-events', 'agenda denial' and 'silences' were deemed too hard to handle. Or perhaps the terrain of counterfactual reasoning that opens up as soon as one takes inaction seriously was deemed too treacherous, though a heroic subset

of political scientists has since continued to push the agenda, even commencing a dedicated academic *Journal of Political Power* in the mid-2000s (Dowding, 2012).

3 ON STUDYING INACTION

- How to offset this propensity to look at government action rather than inaction? Doing so begins by an act of recognition: that both matter equally in the lives of citizens and politics, and that structures and processes of power and influence are at work in producing both of them. This presupposes an ability to 'know inaction when one sees it'. Perhaps the following definition might help in this regard: *an instance and/or pattern of non-intervention by a government in relation to matters within and potentially within its jurisdiction*. It calls upon us to focus on situations in which governments can be reasonably expected to 'do something' but do not, and especially on them continuing to not act over periods of time. We can all think of instances that fit the bill:
- how most Western governments 'not-addressed' ecosystem decline and climate change for decades,
 - how they 'not-addressed' the implications of their ageing populations for their welfare states and pension systems,
 - how they 'not-addressed' the long-term implications of their scrambling to import 'temporary' workers from North Africa and the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s,
 - how they 'not-addressed' the blatant failure of their 'war on drugs' policies (while deriving tax income from 'legal' addictive substances and practices such as smoking, alcohol and gambling whose destructive social impacts continue to be amply documented),
 - how they 'not-addressed' the transformative impact of the Internet on their systems of government.

Framed in this manner, it becomes easy to see that inaction presents a problem that both the young and the less young Leo Huberts should be interested in. For inaction raises twin challenges:

First, there are empirical-analytical challenges: How does it come about, how is it maintained and how does it end? Why do politics with institutionally similar systems of government display different degrees and forms of (in)action with respect to certain pivotal social issues? And what role does power play in all of this?

Secondly, there are normative questions to be asked about inaction. What is the moral status of government inaction? What, if any, ethical defences of inaction in the face of societal needs, grievances, conflict and suffering can be formulated? To what extent can inaction be an expression of virtuosity in public officials or institutional integrity of public organizations? A case in point can be found in Lew-

is's (2018) recent account of federal agency heads in the U.S. government refusing to act on the capricious instructions of incoming president Donald Trump and some of his bizarre or warrior-like political appointees.

In a short piece like this, one can only whet a reader's appetite and not fulfil it, but let me, in closing, offer a few ingredients for further study that 'older Leo', or anyone else for that matter, may wish to consider in their attempts to bring inaction (non-issues, non-decisions) back onto the agenda of the study of politics, government and public administration.

To help with both sets of questions it might be relevant to make a working distinction between purposeful and inadvertent forms of inaction (see Table 1, taken from McConnell and 't Hart, 2019). This distinction is analytically relevant because it trains our attention to different manifestations and combinations of 'agency' and 'structure' that may be at work at the micro level of individual policy actors, the meso level of issues and institutional processes and the macro level of society's 'deep structures', collective identities, belief systems, value hierarchies and hegemonic discourses. And it may form the basis for making case-by-case assessments regarding moral agency, culpability and luck.

Table 1 A Typology of Policy Inaction

Category	DELIBERATE			INADVERTENT		
	Type I: Calculation	Type II: Ideology	Type III: Influence	Type IV: Cognition	Type V: Judgement	Type VI: Constraint
Drivers	Strategic and tactical considerations	Values, convictions and world views	Political and institutional power	Blinders, heuristics, biases and self-censorship in interpreting the world	Not grasping the importance and/or urgency of the issue	Lack of fundamental tools and resources to tackle the issue
Operative mechanisms	Waiting for issue to 'ripen' until it can be successfully addressed	Refusing to see an issue as a problem for government	Veto powers flagged or exercised by political and/or societal actors	Lack of boundary scanning and early warning routines	Disconnect between 'the world's' felt experiences and 'system and 'system worlds'	No legal authority to act. No financial resources to fund effective policies
	Waiting for commotion about issue to die down	Belief that market solutions are superior	Key political actors needed for effective policy	Institutional amnesia	Historical analogies	Lack of proven theories of action to

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Illustrative case	Avoid compelling promises other goals High material or political cost of changing the status quo	'taboo' issues that disturb the dominant consensus	refuse to cooperate or compromise	Breakdown of public service analysis and advice	checks on executive action	guide policy design
	Continued reliance on fossil fuel and nuclear energy sources	Sexual innuendo and abuse in the workplace (prior States to #Me-Too)	Absence of gun laws reform in the United States	Intelligence failure prior to 9/11 ('The dots didn't get connected')	Institutional abuse in aged care homes and mental institutions	Tracking 'plastic soup'

I suspect that Leo Huberts and his band of colleagues studying integrity in government would, like me, agree with Rothstein's (2015: 94) claim that "the quality of the administrative part of the state... has been severely under-studied, under-theorised and under-measured in political science" (my emphasis). What this little essay throws into the mix is the observation that that *quality of government has to be understood and assessed both in terms of the actions the state takes and those it does not*. Government inaction is a form of action too, with human consequences and therefore moral ramifications. Both the use and the non-use of the state's instruments of violence in a given situation are consequential. Both taking and not taking concerted action to curb greenhouse gas emissions or reverse biodiversity decline have impacts on our planet and for unborn generations. Problematising and normalising the growth of economic inequalities in liberal democracies are both political acts.

Moreover, state action and non-action can be a product of entirely defensible institutional processes and even of virtuous practices of governing (as in, for example, instances of 'benign neglect'). It can also emanate from moral luck. Conversely, it can be the result of poor leadership and bad governance (Helms, 2013), basic limitations of human information processing or force majeure.

The challenge for students of politics of government is to find which is which. For that we need an even-handed approach. I have argued that we need to think again about what we choose to see and not see when we look at boundary objects such as the state, politics, government, governing and governance. And at the

same time, once we have 'brought inaction back' into our research agendas, we need to remain curious and open-minded in studying its occurrence. We need concepts and tools of the kind that Table 1 purports to be: analytical instruments that avoid morally pre-stigmatising – as some 'critical political scientists' in the 1970s were wont to – inaction (and the power that is at work in it) as a product of elite conspiracy, malicious intent, delusions of grandeur or sheer stupidity. If I have learned one thing in three decades of studying disasters, crises and policy failures, it is that many failures to prevent bad things from happening are not the product of such big pathologies. Instead they emerge from the seemingly unlikely confluence of minor design flaws, small errors, understandable misunderstandings, routines being applied to non-routine circumstances, drip-drip ethical satisficing and bad luck. In my current research on successful politics, organizations and networks, I am beginning to discover that, mutatis mutandis, pretty much similar cumulation of small causes rather than grand plans and great leaders often does the trick (Compton and 'I Hart, 2019; Compton et al., 2019; Luejens et al., 2019).

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POWER AND INFLUENCE: THE EARLY LEO HUBERTS

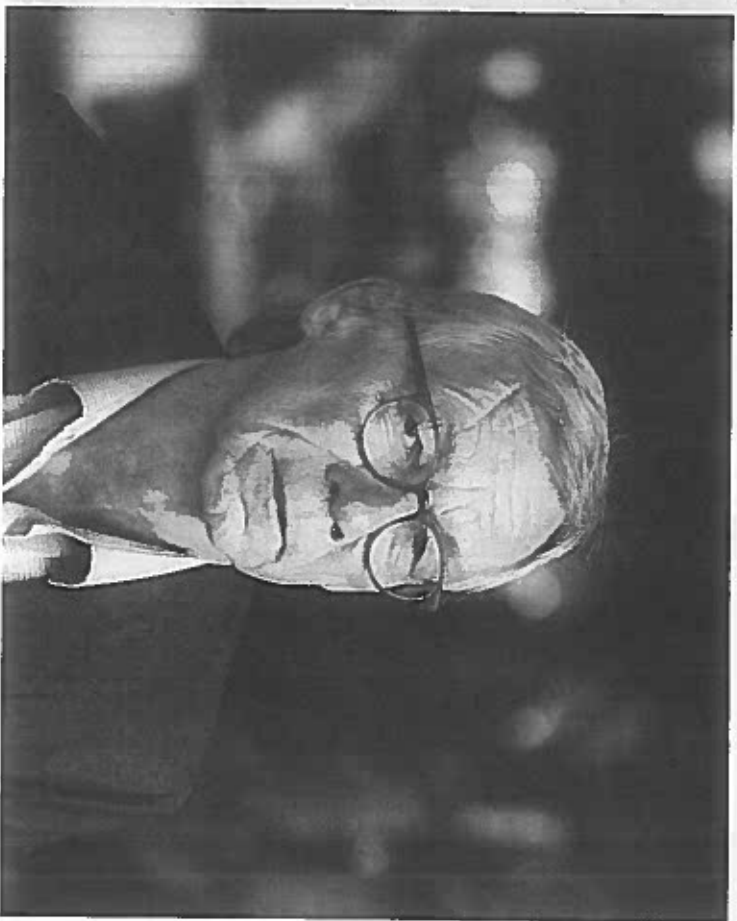
Klaartje Peters

In the field of integrity studies, the contribution of Dutch academics in particular, has been notable. In the second half of the 1990s fishing on corruption first and moved on to the broader perspective of integrity in public organizations. Perhaps not many people began his academic career in a different field of research. Start his thesis at the Catholic University Nijmegen (now: Radboud University) spent more than 10 years doing research on power and influence-making. What is his legacy in this field?

1 EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTION: INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS SERVANTS

In 1988 Hubert's defended his PhD thesis at Leiden University influence of non-governmental organizations on decision-making structure of national highways (Hubert's, 1988). His research was part of a larger research programme, at the Sociological University, called 'Non-governmental organizations and power of movements like the anti-nuclear movement, the squatter movement the environmental activists. A year later he published some of the long gone journal *International Social Movement Research* (I concluded that environmental organizations influenced five of the making processes he had analysed. Characteristics of the decision-making appeared to be a more determining factor in the extent of the characteristics of the environmental organization itself or employed: when public actors were divided and the opposition like businesses was weak, the environmental organizations were

The qualitative method of process analysis that Hubert's use decision-making processes allowed him to also look at the influence of actors. Most remarkable are his conclusions about the



IT IS ALL ABOUT INTEGRITY, STUPID

Studies on, about or inspired by the work of Leo Huberts

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