E-government, public policy and the growth of conditionality

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Abstract: This paper examines how electronic data exchange networks are enabling and constituting conditional policies, whereby a person’s eligibility in one policy domain becomes contingent on their behaviour in another. It is argued that the growth of these policy directions must be understood as a result of both the growth of a neo-liberal political rationality and developments in information technologies. A detailed case study of the e-government project, the Australian Immunisation Register, and two government benefits illustrates the paper’s arguments.

Keywords: e-policy making; social policy; conditional; welfare; electronic data exchange

1. Introduction

E-government – that is the use of the internet and other networked information and communication technologies in government activities – has rapidly focused attention on the way in which government activity is being transformed. While a great deal of attention has been given to the way e-government provides new tools for the restructuring of public administration, very little attention has been given to the way in which these new technologies contribute to changes in the substance of public policy and thus to the wider implications for the nature of citizenship.

This paper observes that there has been a shift away from less universal towards more conditional policy, whereby access to public benefits and services have become increasingly conditional on a greater range of individual characteristics and behaviours. The paper argues that this shift results from a co-joining of ideological, financial and technological, in which e-government developments play an important component.

The paper’s argument is first developed in a section examining the role of e-government in the policy process. It holds that e-government must be understood as a political technology that contributes to transformations in the very substance and nature of public policy. The next section outlines the growth of the conditionality of public policy. Many examples are given, and the political, financial and technological factors underlying this growth are discussed. This is then followed by a case study of Australia’s Childhood Immunisation Register as a key technological component in the receipt of welfare benefits (namely Maternity Immunisation Allowance) and various other incentive payments. The paper concludes with a discussion of the broader implications of conditional policy for society and social citizenship

2. E-government and the policy process

E-government is part of the domain of public administration. E-government’s contribution is largely seen as one which contributes to the implementation of government policy. This view is underpinned by a classical characterisation of government and the policy-making process, as one in which policy-makers (usually elected officials) determine policy, and it is the role of administrators (usually bureaucrats) to implement and administer it (eg Colebatch 1998: 72-75; Wilson 1895). E-government is yet another technological device with which to help administrators implement the policy determined elsewhere.

This characterisation of the policy process implies that, once determined by policy-makers, policy is a rigid entity. The job of administrators is to bring the vision and decision to reality. This is basis for much research to find out why policy is not properly implemented or does not have the intended affect.

However, increasingly it is being recognised that public policy is not clearly separated from public administration. In particular, policy makers must take account of the limitations that the
administrative apparatus may impose in what policies are feasible to implement. Secondly, political
decision makers often make large scale policy decisions and require government bureaucrats to
determine the micro policy that fleshes out these decisions. Furthermore, much public policy
provides an element of discretion for public administrators to determine how to apply the policy in
particular circumstances. In doing so, policy is made at the street level (eg Brodkin 2000). Finally,
the very practice of administering public policy generates new information and insights that feed
into and give rise to new policy formation. In this range of ways, the dynamics of public policy
making and policy administration are inter-related.

Given this insight, it raises the question of what role technology – and e-government in particular –
plays in contributing to policy making and the shape and substance of public policy. To date, this
question has received little attention. However, my earlier work in examining the role of computers
in social security systems has identified that computerisations has contributed to an increasing
quantitative focus in policy-making, a decreasing level of policy discretion in social security policy,

In a recent study of e-governance, Perri 6 (2004) has charted the electronic tools that support the
policy development and decision making process. He characterises them in five groups: generating
understandings; collecting data; organising and analysing data; supporting communication; and
modelling decisions and advising on possible consequences. Although this study demonstrates
how central these technologies have become to the policy making process, 6 does not consider the
question of whether such technologies may shape the substance of policy in particular ways.

Much e-government rhetoric on the technology’s capacity for more joined-up and seamless
government, focuses on how e-government can enhance the government service delivery process.
However, we might speculate that the very same capacity that enables service delivery to cross
and link up traditional institutional boundaries could provide the capacity to enable policy
development and policy itself to cross over traditional institutional boundaries. Indeed, this paper
argues just that. That the networked nature of e-government has given rise to a growth in the
conditionality of policy, whereby eligibility for a government service or policy in one policy domain
becomes conditional upon policy and data within another policy domain.

3. The rise of conditionality: politics, economics, technology

Public policy has almost always been conditional. Conditions are required in order for the policy’s
intent and focus to be defined. Government benefits and services for families with dependent
children, for example, are conditional on a household having dependent children. Policies
regarding retirement must, by implication, define retirement (normally in terms of age) and this, in
turn, becomes a condition for the application of the policy to particular individuals.

Clearly the range and detail of the conditions of a policy could be quite complex. This is a
necessary requirement in the process of defining the intent and subjects of the policy. For example,
as William Walters (2000: 59-66) has detailed, the receipt of unemployment insurance was, from its
very inception, based on the conditions that the person: had previously contributed to the social
insurance fund (thereby reflecting the logic of insurance); was not employed (thereby reflecting the
intent to support people without paid employment); was involuntarily unemployed (thereby
reflecting the policy perspective that an individual’s unemployment was as a result socio-economic
factors beyond their control); was capable of work (thereby reflecting the policy intent of supporting
individuals out of work until they get work) and was willing to accept suitable employment (thereby
reflecting the policy intent of ensuring that the benefit was for people involuntarily excluded from
work).

The key point is that the conditionality of government policy was intrinsically related to the logic,
rationale and intent of the policy. Changes in the conditionality of policies occurred over time. For
example benefits to widows were expanded to deserted wives and then to sole fathers. In each
change in the conditionality, the underlying logic, rationale and intent of the policy correspondingly
changed. For example, when unemployment benefits become means-tested, in order to target to
households most in need, the rationale of those benefits shifts from one of insurance, status maintenance and poverty avoidance to one of a safety net and poverty alleviation.

Although government policy has always been conditional, it is argued in this paper that since the late twentieth century (from the 1980s onwards) we have seen considerable rise in the conditionality of policy in both quantity and quality. The distinctive feature of this ‘new conditionality’ is that the conditions placed on policy are now crossing over and connecting two distinct policy logics, rationales and intents.

The advent of ‘workfare’ – or ‘active’, welfare-to-work policies – is a key feature in this new policy landscape. Through the requirement of making unemployment benefits conditional on actively using employment services, workfare links together the policy domain of social protection with that of employment services. While social protection provides income support for unemployed persons and is based on a logic of poverty alleviation, employment services seek to build and enhance individual (and thus collective) human capital and their employability.\(^1\)

In the case study examined below, child benefits are made conditional on a child being fully immunised. In this case, the policy domain of social protection becomes co-joined with public health. Again, two distinct policy logics, rationales and intents are brought together. Social protection, with its logic of reducing child poverty, improving a child’s long-term opportunities and enhancing equality become linked with public health objectives of using preventative medicine to bolster the health of the population by curtailing the existence and spread of infectious diseases.

Such conditionality has now proliferated, as Peter Dwyer (2004) has recently noted in the British context. Under the reforming New Labour Blair government, public housing has become conditional on responsible (ie not anti-social) behaviour. Unemployment benefits are conditional on attendance at adult literacy and numeracy programs. Health care is conditional on non-violent behaviour. Maternity benefits are conditional on receiving professional healthcare advice. In addition, serious policy consideration has been given to making child benefits conditional on children not playing truant, and making welfare food schemes conditional on receiving professional healthcare advice.

In Australia, such conditionality has been advanced by a conservative Howard government under the notion of ‘Mutual Obligation’. Recently, the government has promoted this approach for advancing the social and economic development of the structurally disadvantaged indigenous people. In one recent case, the government agreed to install petrol bowsers into a remote indigenous community on the condition that the indigenous children would maintain good personal hygiene.

Despite the proliferation and ever-expanding use of this ‘new conditionality’ in public policy, it is arguable that there is a coherent logic underlying these new hybrid policies. For example, does it really make policy sense (from a social protection perspective) to further endanger an ‘at risk’ child by heightening their poverty by removing child benefit if they are truanting? Rather, the new conditionality of policy is about using one policy area to generate greater incentives and leverages over the behaviour of subject populations and peoples. Policy-makers might argue that by doing so in the longer term improves individual and societal outcomes, but in the process two different policy objectives are being confused, rather than being recast.

There are a range of political and economic changes which underpin and promote the new conditionality. In particular, neo-liberal ideologies emphasise the importance of incentives for shaping human behaviour. Neo-paternalism argues that ‘failed citizens’ – such as the unemployed and sole parents – need a calculus of penalties and rewards in order to reform their behaviours (Mead 1986; 1997). Communitarianism (and Third Way thinking) emphasises that social rights are linked with social responsibilities, whereby justifying the conditionality of benefits (eg Etzioni 1995;

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1 Employment services in the form of job-matching in labour exchanges can also be viewed as a mechanism to constitute an efficient labour market (eg Walters 2000: 45-52).
1996; Giddens 1999; Dwyer 2000; 2004). These political ideologies are reflected in growth of phrases and terms like ‘mutual obligation’ and ‘no rights without responsibilities’.

Fiscal constraint by states seeking to manage welfare demands and pressures also underpin the new conditionality. Certainly, the move from universal to means-tested benefits reflects greater use of conditionality. However, the economic elements for the emergence of the ‘new conditionality’ – where policies in one domain are made more conditional on another – relate more to inducing behavioural change which will have economic outcomes.

The third key element underpinning the rise of the new conditionality relates to technical innovation, particularly the development of electronic data networks. Administering conditional policy, in the sense discussed in this paper, is intensive. By its very nature conditional policy requires information from two and often more different policy domains, and thus from different government bureaucracies, to be brought together. Until the advent of electronic data networks, such information was provided in paper form. Typically, a government agency assessing eligibility to a policy based on information from a second government agency would write a letter to confirm that information, which would then be responded to with another letter. An alternative to this would be for the first agency to obtain information directly from the person whose eligibility is being assessed in the form of a document provided to that person from the second agency. These are quite labour-intensive and coordination-intensive processes. As a result, once eligibility is established, it is infeasible to reassess eligibility on a regular basis according to (possible) changed circumstances.

In contrast, the development and deployment of electronic data networks allow government agencies much greater capacity to obtain and check each other’s information. In some cases, a government agency will regularly publish in electronic form its data holdings for other agencies to obtain and link with their records. In other cases, staff in one agency can log into the other agency’s data network to obtain information. More significantly is the increasing use of data networks to automatically exchange and update information between agency systems without human intervention.

These new technological developments have greatly assisted the information transfers required in administering conditional policies. As a result of these technical innovations, the capacity of governments to make use of conditional policies has been greatly enhanced and thus underpins the rise of the new conditionality in government policy.

We now consider in more detail these policy and technological developments in a case study of the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register.

4. Case study: the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register

The Australian Childhood Immunisation Register (ACIR) is a government computer database updated by electronic and paper notifications from doctors and other health providers. It was established on 1 January 1996, as part of a wider response to a decline in immunisation levels and an increase in vaccine-preventable diseases. As a result, funds were allocated in the 1995-96 Federal Labor Government budget to establish the ACIR, for a trial period of two years, as a national electronic register of information for measuring and improving immunisation rates and managing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable disease.

The Register is administered by the Health Insurance Commission (HIC) on behalf of the Australian Department of Health and Ageing under a 1997 Strategic Partnership Agreement, as part of the broader Immunise Australia program (HCA 2000, 82). The Register is used to monitor immunisation coverage at national, state and local levels, and identifies high-risk areas where there are large numbers of unimmunised children. The register has also been used to send reminder

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2 There is a myriad of privacy, data protection and fraud issues raised in these data exchanges which is not discussed here, but see Bellamy et al 2005.
3 This is the approach taken by the Australian Business Registry for its ABR partners (see www.abr.gov.au).
4 This is the approach taken between Centrelink and the Australian Immunisation Registry discussed below.
notices to parents when a child is due or overdue for immunisation. However, in 2000 this was replaced with a system of immunisation history statements at 1, 2 and 5 years of age, which parents can also order by phone or through the internet.

A child is automatically added to the immunisation register when enrolled with Medicare – Australia’s national universal health insurance scheme – or when an immunisation provider supplies the child’s details to the register. Service providers can notify ACIR of immunisation encounters electronically through the HIC internet site or through electronic data interfaces in practice management systems. Providers can also use paper notification forms for manual processing.

In February 1997, a number of initiatives were linked to childhood immunisation in The Seven Point Plan, which was launched by the then Federal Minister for Health and Aged Care, Dr Michael Wooldridge. This plan included financial incentives for parents and General Practitioners, and initiatives related to immunisation targets, promotional days, education and research, and school entry requirements.

The financial incentives for parents commenced in April 1998, and include a one-off means-tested lump-sum payment called the Maternity Immunisation Allowance ($213.60 in 2005) for each child 18-24 months, who is fully immunised or has an approved exemption. Exemptions can be approved for medical contraindications, natural immunity, or conscientious objection for personal, philosophical or religious reasons. Eligibility for the government’s Child Care Benefit, a universal benefit to assist families with childcare costs, is also linked to immunisation requirements and many states have implemented immunisation requirements for entry to child care centres and schools.

In addition to these family benefits, which is the focus of this paper, a number of financial incentives for GPs commenced in July 1998. The overall aim of the General Practitioner Immunisation Incentive (GPII) scheme is to ‘encourage at least 90 per cent of practices to achieve 90 per cent proportions of full immunisation’ (HIC 2002). Government payments are made to General Practitioners when immunisations are made, when ACIR is notified of the immunisation, when immunisation schedules are complete, and when the 90 per cent level of coverage of patients in their practice has been achieved.

The significance of e-government is evident in administration of Maternity Immunisation Allowance and Child Care Benefit. This is undertaken by Centrelink – Australia’s government-owned and run social security benefit delivery agency. In order to assess the eligibility to these benefits, Centrelink must determine whether a child is immunised to the level required for their age. ACIR is the central database for this information. However, ACIR is operated by a separate Australian government agency, therefore requiring information transfer. Furthermore, such information transfer is constrained by privacy laws which require the consent of the parents whose children’s immunisation records are required.

To operationalise this transfer of information, claimants may provide Centrelink with a printed report from ACIR indicating the immunisation status of the child or they may provide Centrelink with the child’s Medicare (ie national medical insurance) number and authorisation to allow Centrelink to use this to electronically access the child’s immunisation data from the ACIR. In the first case, the claimant retains complete control over their child’s immunisation information, but incurs additional hassle. In particular, the parent must remember to lodge the additional information with the claim form, and must also provide regular updates of the child’s immunisation status after the child reaches the age for another round of immunisation treatments. In contrast, by providing the child’s Medicare number once, Centrelink can provide ongoing electronic monitoring with ACIR to ensure that eligibility is maintained without requiring any follow up with the parent (unless, the child’s immunisation status changes).

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5 Pay rates are, however, based on household income.
In this case, e-government – in the form of automatic electronic data exchange networks connecting computer systems in two government agencies – provides the means with which to efficiently administer family payments conditional on childhood immunisation status. This example also helps to illustrate the administrative and resource implications of using more traditional paper and manual processes in implementing the policy.

5. Conclusion

This paper has observed that there has been an increased use of conditionality in the formulation of government policy. While conditionality has been always been an element of government policy, the recent manifestation involves a qualitative shift which links policy in one policy domain and rationality with a policy in another domain and rationality. While political and economic changes have helped stimulated this shift, the advent of e-government has been a significant factor in making those political dreams an administrative reality.

The growth of this new conditionality in public policy raises questions about the nature of society and citizenship when conditionality becomes the standard for public policy making. Indeed, it could be argued that the birth of the new conditionality has given little consideration of broader and longer-term socio-political consequences and has occurred because we can now operate in this manner.

In considering the wider socio-political implications of the new conditionality, it is important to recognise that many of the policies deploying such conditionality involve social welfare services and are targeted to low and, to a lesser extent, middle income people. This is due to the long-standing conception of social welfare — as compared with taxation benefits — is a ‘hand out’ whereas taxation benefits are entitlements. Social welfare is seen as benefits provided by other hard-working people, whereas taxation benefits are the government’s recognising and returning to you what you have already earned.

This divide in the application of conditionality highlights how the application of the new conditionality, and its concomitant governing of individual behaviour, is not equally applied across the population. Indeed, the more disadvantaged a person is, the more likely they will be subject to these new conditional policies. Seen in this light, the new conditionality could be interpreted as a new form of class control. More prosaically, this divide in the application of the new conditionality should alert us to the additional dangers which may come from making government policy conditional on other policies when the most disadvantage populations are involved. Indeed, experience in the use of workfare suggests that it is the most marginalised people that are unable to understand and make use of conditional policies (due to illiteracy, mental health issues, substance abuse and the like), and as a result are penalised and excluded from benefit, further reinforcing their marginalisation. Instead of leading to behavioural modification, the new conditionality further repels the marginalised beyond the social order.

Peter Dwyer (2004) observes that this is made all the more possible because conditionality, by its very nature, shifts the locus of social problems from social dynamics and structures to individuals, their characteristics and behaviours. By linking eligibility to a policy in one domain with elements in another domain, it becomes the individual’s realities that count. The new conditionality is thus another process of individualisation, in which, as Ulrich Beck has observed ‘social crises appear as individual crises’ and the conceptualisation and concern for inequality evaporates (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 39).

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