

## Bringing Policy Communities Back In: The Case of Fire Service Cover

Wyn Grant

*It is argued that the concept of a policy community has an enduring value in the analysis of public policy, especially if an emphasis is placed on the way in which ideas are excluded from debates. Historical analysis based on the National Archives using a political science conceptual framework can offer fresh perspectives. The concept is developed through a specification of the conditions that encourage policy community formation and survival. Policy inertia led to a policy that produced a higher rate of deaths from fire in the UK than in other developed countries, especially among the socially excluded. The policy community concept can be of value in the policy analysis tool-kit, especially if policy frames that have become embedded to the exclusion of alternatives are identified.*

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This article argues that the metaphor of a policy community has an enduring value in the analysis of particular areas of public policy. This is especially the case if an emphasis is placed on the way in which particular ideas are excluded from the debate that, in the case of the British fire service, affected the whole course of its development. Policy communities can easily develop the characteristics of what Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones (1993, 6) term 'policy monopolies', which they define as 'a monopoly on political understandings concerning the policy of interest, and an institutional arrangement that reinforces that understanding'. They explain that policy monopolies have two important characteristics that can be found in the case of the fire service: 'First, a definable institutional structure is responsible for policymaking, and that structure limits access to the policy process. Second, a powerful supporting idea is associated with the institution' (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 7). In their original work in this area, Grant Jordan and Jeremy Richardson (1977, 57) were interested in 'the wider phenomenon of government by collaboration'. This involved committees like the Central Water Advisory Committee in which interests negotiated with each other and then advised government on how policy should develop.

It is argued here that tracing how powerful ideas emerge and help to shape a policy monopoly requires a long-term perspective that can identify the points at which significant changes occur. As Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith have argued (1999, 118), 'understanding the process of policy change—and the role of technical information therein—requires a time perspective of a decade or more'. Indeed, as this article suggests, the required time span may be much longer. Political scientists have not used historical methods as much as they might have done to understand policy development, in part because of an understandable need to differentiate the two disciplines. Political science as a discipline originated in part from the efforts of individuals trained as historians. Now that political science is fully



established as an independent discipline, there may be value in reviving the use of historical analysis to address policy issues. This article draws on material in the National Archives, but it interrogates them in a way that is different from the techniques that a historian would deploy. Rather than presenting an historical narrative, the objective is to apply and refine a framework developed within political science.

The relative decline of the term 'policy community' from political analysis and its displacement by policy networks might seem to be an appropriate reflection of the shift from government to governance. There has been a movement from the central control of policy by a core executive to more diffuse forms of co-operation among a variety of actors. As Richardson notes, the Achilles heel of the concept of policy community 'is the implication of stable policies, as well as stable relationships and a stable membership' (Richardson 2000, 1007). 'In essence, the old policy communities lost control of policy framing and agenda setting and had to react to agendas set by others' (Richardson 2000, 1010). However, as this article demonstrates, a stable policy community in an important area of public policy was able to persist for over 60 years.

### Exploring our Understanding of 'Policy Community'

What is a policy community? Grant Jordan and William Maloney (1997, 559) portray it as a type of sub-government 'that is a stable, tight and continuing arrangement'. When Richardson and Jordan originated the term, they were seeking to emphasise the way in which policy-making in Britain was disaggregated into a number of distinct vertical compartments, almost always organised around a government department and its client groups and largely closed off to the general public:

The term 'community' was chosen deliberately to reflect the intimate relationship between groups and departments, the development of common perceptions and the development of a common language for describing policy problems (Richardson 1993, 93).

'It is the relationship involved in committees, the *policy community* of departments and groups, and the practices of co-option and the consensual style, that better account for policy outcomes than do examinations of party stances, of manifestos and parliamentary influence' (Richardson and Jordan 1979, 73–74). It is therefore interesting that more recent research reveals a continuing phenomenon of vertical organisation in central government policy-making in Britain despite the emphasis on 'joined-up' government, using the concept of 'policy chimneys'. 'Many officials talk of policy chimneys where policy is developed within a particular section without regard to wider policy issues or other parts of the department' (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2001, 125). Policy networks of clients then develop around the particular part of the government department in an essentially asymmetric relationship in which government is the most important actor. Nevertheless, David Marsh, David Richards and Martin Smith conclude (2001, 235) that 'there are very few relatively tight policy networks, policy communities in the terminology of Marsh and Rhodes'. Mapping the relative incidence of policy com-

munities and policy networks would require an even larger survey of different government departments than was possible in the ESRC Whitehall Programme and would probably not be a good investment of resources. If policy communities are particularly resistant to policy changes that threaten to undermine the policy community (as the case of agriculture suggests), this is of significance for the conduct of public policy and its effectiveness even if the incidence of policy communities is numerically dwarfed by more network-like arrangements.

It is therefore interesting that the one case Marsh, Richards and Smith identify of a policy community is that of the relationship between the Home Office and the Association of Chief Police Officers, drawing on earlier research by Elizabeth McLeay (1998). The particular illustrative case that is used here is the provision of fire services in Britain which was a Home Office responsibility until its acquisition briefly by the Department of Local Government, Transport and Regions and then by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Fire services became a statutory responsibility of local authorities in 1938, stimulated by the threat of the outbreak of war. The fire service was established in a way that persisted for over 60 years until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to emphasise 'putting out fires in buildings' (Independent Review of the Fire Service 2002a, Executive Summary, para. 5). Intervention was privileged over prevention and tackling fires in property, particularly commercial property, was in effect given a higher priority than saving lives.

The consequences of these policy choices were non-trivial given that over 600 people a year die from fires in Britain and they also raise issues of social equity. Around three-quarters of death from fires occur in dwelling houses, in some tragic cases involving several members of the same family, with socially excluded groups being particularly vulnerable to death from fire.

The incidence of fire does not affect all parts of society equally. The most vulnerable in society suffer disproportionately from its effects. People are more likely to suffer a fire if the household has young children, if the household is in financial difficulties, or the person has a disability (Independent Review of the Fire Service 2002a, para. 3.14).

The population at large also suffers from the effects of fire. 'The UK experiences a high level of deaths due to fire compared with other developed countries' (Audit Commission 1995, 3). Deaths from fire per 100,000 persons in Britain at 1.24 in 1995–1997 were higher than in France (1.01) and Germany (0.98) although lower than in the United States (1.86).<sup>1</sup> In the empirical discussion, the emphasis will be on the Home Office rules for the provision of fire cover as they have a substantial effect on the type of fire service that is delivered to citizens.

This article uses the Rhodes and Marsh characterisation of policy communities as developed by Carsten Daugbjerg. He characterised policy communities in terms of three dimensions: membership, integration and institutionalisation (Daugbjerg 1998, 44). In terms of members, policy communities can be characterised by a very small number of members and the narrow range of interests represented. In terms of integration they are distinguished from policy networks in terms of frequent interaction for bargaining and negotiation. In terms of institutionalisation they display a consensus on policy principles and procedures to approach policy

problems. However, this approach is further developed later in the article in two ways. First, a specification is made of the conditions that encourage the formation of a relatively closed policy community and its perpetuation over a long period of time. Second, it is argued that more attention has to be paid than has been customary to the values that are embedded deep in the assumptions of a policy community and their relationship to wider policy values. In that sense, ideational variables should be accorded a higher status than has customarily been the case in policy community models.

### **Conditions that Favour the Formation and Perpetuation of a Closed Policy Community**

The fire policy network meets all the conditions for a closed policy community. Four conditions may be specified. The first condition that favours the formation of a closed network is the absence of sustained public interest in the policy arena considered by the policy community. In their list of the characteristics of a stable sub-system, Jordan and Maloney (1997, 558) include 'low public profile (visibility) of decisions' and 'low party political attention level'. A second condition is that the arena should be one in which technical expertise and professional knowledge is regarded as being of considerable importance. The decisions that have to be taken are argued to be 'highly complex technical matters' (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 6) that depend on the possession of specialist knowledge so that there is a bias of leaving decisions in the hands of 'the experts'. 'Experts in all areas spend much of their time convincing others that "outsiders" are not qualified to make decisions in a given area' (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 6). Even if public dissatisfaction does arise, the entry price for joining the debate within the community is high in terms of the specialist knowledge that has to be acquired if a contribution is to be regarded as serious. Thirdly, it clearly helps if there is broad public satisfaction with the quality of the service provided as it discourages political entrepreneurs from seeking to mobilise opinion on the issue. Fourthly, and this particularly applied in the period up until the Thatcher government, external disruption of the policy community is avoided if there is no argument about whether it should be publicly or privately provided. Issues became politicised if they formed part of the somewhat artificial divide between the political parties about public and private provision.

The conditions about the absence of public opinion and the technical character of the service are met remarkably well. As Howard Davis and Alan Norton note (1992, 58):

[The] fire service is generally regarded as being of low political salience because:

1. There is felt to be consensus about the nature of its tasks and the methods of operation;
2. its call on public sector resources is relatively low, that is, it is (comparatively) not a high spender; and
3. the task is often perceived to be 'technical', not raising fundamental issues of political concern.

When the Bain Committee published its initial position paper on the fire service in 2002, it noted the lack of change over a 25-year period. 'There has been an

almost total lack of real political engagement in the Fire Service since the last fire-fighters' strike in 1977 (Independent Review of the Fire Service 2002b, 4). As one informant noted in interview, 'It very rarely gets to near the top of the political agenda and if it does there is always the possibility of shroud waving'. In terms of Home Office politics, the department responsible for the fire service throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'there were usually more important issues involving the police'. If the Thatcher government had any inclinations to radicalism on the issue, 'the rescue of politicians at the Brighton bombing stopped one set of investigations into the fire service'.<sup>2</sup>

Public levels of satisfaction with the fire service have been generally high. 'It is held in particularly high esteem by the general public. Surveys undertaken by brigades indicate that over 90 per cent of the public are "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the service provided' (Audit Commission 1995, 8). It is not a service with which they are in regular contact in the sense that most of them are with the education and health services. It is a service whose presence is reassuring in the unlikely event that they need it. The favourable image is reinforced by media reporting of acts of heroism by firefighters. Any contacts with it are less likely to be characterised by conflict than those with the police, although increasing attacks on firefighters responding to incidents in areas of social exclusion suggest that all uniformed services are seen as unwelcome symbols of authority. The very favourable image that the fire service has is, nevertheless, to a large extent founded on ignorance. As an informant commented in interview:

The fire service has a very favourable image and gets good performance ratings, but this is based on very little knowledge. People do not know whether the service they get is technically very good or not. No one else would be able to stove in your door, flood the building and get a round of applause.<sup>3</sup>

The Audit Commission noted (1995, 15): 'The high level of public satisfaction with the fire service tends to disguise the fact that the nation has failed to respond as effectively as it could to the challenge of fire'. Comparative data suggest that 'Britain's fire service does not perform particularly well by international standards. Countries such as America, Denmark, New Zealand and the Netherlands do better in terms of the protection they get for the amount they spend' (*The Economist*, 30 November 2002, 27).

Although free-market enthusiasts have occasionally suggested that fire services could be more efficiently provided by insurance companies, there has never really been a serious debate about fire service privatisation. In Denmark, a private company, Falck, provides two-thirds of the fire service, along with the ambulance service. There has, however, been no serious debate about sub-contracting fire services to private contractors like refuse collection services. The fire service has not been dragged into the debates about where the boundaries of the state should lie in Britain. Indeed, in small towns and rural areas, the fire service is provided by 'retained' or part-time firefighters and is therefore seen as much as a community service that forms part of 'civil society' rather than a form of provision by the state.

## Development of a Policy Community

The passage of the Fire Brigades Act in 1938 marks the development of a policy community centred on a new division in the Home Office and with its own official arrangements for consultation and seeking advice. The introduction of a statutory duty placed on local authorities to provide fire services created an imperative for more regularised arrangements created for consultation with key policy actors outside government. The Central Advisory Water Committee studied by Jordan and Richardson was established at around the same time (1937) and had a similar mixture of members (local government and professional) to the arrangements established for the fire service. Like the fire service, 'the water world was a closely circumscribed universe' (Jordan and Richardson 1977, 46). Indeed, at some points they overlapped, given the importance of a reliable water supply in fighting fires.

The Home Office had a long-standing responsibility for fire service questions and an individual civil servant, (Sir) Arthur Dixon had shown a continuous interest in the question of more effective means of fighting fires. The Home Office had distinctive characteristics as a department. Even as late as 1965 it was 'surprisingly detached from the rest of Whitehall' and pursued 'a deliberate policy of exclusivity' (Jenkins 1975, 210). The Home Office provided a focal institutional point for a fire service policy community by the establishment of a Fire Brigades Division that was soon split into two branches. However, both the traditions of legitimate representative government and the need for an effective working relationship with those responsible for implementing policy created a need for consultative arrangements with a wider policy community. In Dixon's view, 'some medium for consultation with the Home Office was essential' (National Archives 1937a, 5). Thus, 'from the Home Office point of view, there was a clear need for some body to be available for consultative purposes on the matters affecting the Fire Service as a whole ... His idea was a body representative of the different types of local authorities and of the different parts of the country' (National Archives 1937a, 4).

Officially constituted policy communities must have boundaries and archival sources permit an examination of the reasoning used by officials in setting those boundaries. They must be divided into 'insiders' and 'outsiders', a decision made by government. Indeed, inter-war practice seems to have been more restrictive in terms of who was admitted to policy discussions. Contemporary practice relies much more on long consultation lists covering every conceivably affected interest, reinforced by a code on consultation. The more restrictive practices used before the Second World War are evident from the papers relating to the establishment of the Royal Commission on Fire Brigades and Fire Prevention at the beginning of the 1920s. The Non-Tariff Fire Association made determined efforts to have a member appointed to the Commission alongside the rival Fire Offices Committee. They were unsuccessful, as was the British Fire Prevention Committee (BFPC) and Lloyds. In a note Dixon commented, 'It would be absurd to have a representative on the Commission for every insurance interest which has anything to do with fire risks' (National Archives 1921a). This view was endorsed at a higher level within the department when Sir Edward Troup wrote somewhat tartly to Lloyds: 'The Commission would exceed all reasonable limits of size if an attempt were made to include on it representatives of all bodies interested in questions of prevention and

extinction of fires and the control and constitution of Fire Brigades' (National Archives 1921b).

The Home Office had relatively good information at its disposal about the standing and effectiveness of various bodies. The BFPC was unsuccessful in its prolonged campaign to make a nomination. Dixon noted:

The BFPC has done good work in the past ... I understand that the Committee has been pretty well defunct since Mr Sachs' death: They do not seem to think so: but I am sure that their standing does not justify any further representation (National Archives 1921a).

What was being constructed was in many ways an epistemic community in which expertise was the key criterion for membership. The Royal Institute of British Architects was able to win a place on the Commission when they demonstrated the relevance of their skills. More generally, the Home Office operated in terms of a notion of who might have a legitimate 'stake' in an issue, a concept that anticipated the modern concept of a 'stakeholder'. Explaining the exclusion of the Rural District Council Associations (but not other local authority associations) from the Emergency Fire Services Committee that met between 1927 and 1932, the Home Office explained:

The only reason why the Association was not invited in the first instance to suggest a representative to serve on the Committee was the relatively small 'stake' which the Rural Districts would have in the particular problem referred to the Committee (National Archives 1927–1932).

In this instance, the criterion for exclusion was not so much a lack of expertise as their inability to supply modern fire appliances for schemes of co-operation in time of war. The criteria for exclusion varied, and could be more explicitly political as was the case for the trade unions, but what was clear was the Home Office's determination to exercise selectivity. The Home Office was also in favour of organisations in civil society co-operating with each other to facilitate the implementation of public policy. Dixon told the National Fire Brigades Association that it was 'for the associations to come to a satisfactory understanding among themselves so that action could proceed smoothly when any co-operative schemes or other measures were framed and promulgated' (National Archives 1934).

External consultations on the 1938 legislation concentrated on the local authority associations. The Association of Municipal Corporations was almost effusive in its praise 'of the prompt way in which the Home Office had met the views of the Association as expressed at the earlier meeting'. In general, the consultation process was sympathetic to issues raised by bodies representing institutions of various kinds, reflecting the advantages they possessed in exerting influence on public policy (Salisbury 1984). Concerns raised by the statutory undertakings represented by the Railway Companies Association and the Dock and Harbour Companies Association about their position led to consultations with the Ministry of Health which suggested: 'We think that a saving clause ... ought to be inserted in the Bill, if only to avoid opposition in another place' (National Archives 1938a). However, outsider groups which did not have contacts in the House of Lords, or indeed lacked the inside knowledge to understand the process that was being followed, received less

sympathetic treatment. The Greater London Professional Fire Officers Board wrote to suggest 'that a fair representation of serving officers of the Fire Service should be appointed to the Committee set up to promote the [Fire Brigade Bill] as the Committee so constituted does not consist of any technicians of the Service concerned' (National Archives 1937b). They were dismissed with the comment: 'I am directed by the Secretary of State to refer to your letter of the 22<sup>nd</sup> ultimo, and to say that no Committee has been set up for this purpose' (National Archives 1938b).

The policy community was given formal expression in the Central Advisory Committee for Fire Services (and its Scottish counterpart) which brought together the Home Office; the local authority associations and the London County Council; and the fire service represented by the London Fire Brigade, the National Fire Brigades Association, the Institution of Fire Engineers and the Professional Fire Brigades Association. What was immediately noticeable was the absence of any representative of organised labour. This was not accidental. Home Office officials thought that the notion of a trade union in the fire service was incompatible with the idea of a disciplined, uniformed service under the Crown. They particularly objected to a union which had a long history of being on the left of politics and which was thought to be susceptible to Communist infiltration. Dixon complained many years afterwards that the incorporation of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) within the policy community 'gave rise to many difficulties ... In some areas ... the effect on Service efficiency, discipline and esprit de corps was distinctly prejudicial' (Dixon undated, 944). However, under the wartime coalition government, Herbert Morrison brought the FBU within the policy community, a status that was confirmed by the 1947 legislation. Relations with the FBU were, however, to be a source of continuing difficulty for governments up to and including the New Labour governments after 1997, culminating in the FBU's disaffiliation from the Labour party in 2004.

Herbert Morrison tried to steer a middle course between Home Office officials, who saw the FBU as irresponsible and the FBU itself, which was unwilling to accept the constraints that insider status implied. At a meeting in 1941 he pointed out that he had recognised the union through the membership of the Joint Consultative Committee, but 'he felt, however, that the Union was getting into rather dangerous waters' (National Archives 1941, 1). Morrison reminded them that insider status required adherence to a particular language code and a willingness to win the confidence of civil servants:

At the bottom of the trouble with the Union's activities was really a matter of expression and language in the handling of a very difficult situation. The essential thing for the Union to bear in mind was the necessity of acting so that mutual confidence between them and the Department was fostered (National Archives 1941, 2).

The FBU failed to respond in the way that was hoped for and Morrison reminded them in 1942: 'The recognition of a Union of this kind by the Department responsible for the administration of a disciplined service demanded the development by mutual agreement of an appropriate technique of consultation' (National Archives 1942a, 3). He reinforced this warning with a decision to maintain the prohibition on the use of fire brigade premises for union meetings. Should this have no effect, he implied the existence of an even bigger penalty, the loss of insider status. He



stated that he had no intention of withdrawing official recognition, therefore the FBU's officials should do nothing that might prejudice future relations.

The question of local representation was a particularly difficult issue, but eventually it was solved by the mediating intervention of the Trades Union Congress and the reluctance of senior fire officers who took a pragmatic position to back the Home Office hardliners. The question of union membership of the policy community had become politicised and risked slipping out of the control of the Home Office. It became 'a matter of major policy whether the issue is to be forced against the very definite opposition of the TUC' (National Archives 1942b, 2), and the Home Office was obliged to accept that the FBU had entered the policy community largely on its own terms. There were limits to the extent to which government could determine the boundaries of the policy community. There is no doubt that Home Office civil servants, who missed no opportunity to criticise the FBU in their internal memoranda, would have preferred to exclude the union from the policy community, but this was simply not practical politics.

### **Embedding Values: The Case of Fire Cover**

It was argued earlier that analysis of policy communities needed to pay more attention to the values embedded deep within them which guide the conduct of policy and are usually left undisturbed by external scrutiny. The question of FBU involvement in the policy community became highly politicised, but as long as matters were perceived as predominantly technical, Home Office civil servants, acting in consultation with the policy community, could have a substantial influence on the direction of policy. Their ability to shape policy was probably reinforced by the absence of in-house technical expertise, other than in the person of Colonel Symonds, the Home Office's Fire Adviser, who was not well regarded by the brigades.<sup>4</sup> 'The absence of a fire inspectorate before 1947, unlike other areas of departmental policy, enabled Dixon and Symonds to influence decision making, with the former injecting administrative authority into the void, employing the knowledge of the Fire Adviser to legitimise his ideas' (Ewen 2003, 330). This pattern of policy-making is evident if one considers the key case of fire cover. Fire cover may be defined as:

The level of protection provided by a fire brigade or department depends on the time it takes to respond to a call, reach a fire scene and control the fire. This level, termed 'fire cover', therefore depends on the number, siting and strength of fire stations in terms of manpower and equipment (Ramachandran 1998, 76–77).

Britain has used a system of risk categorisation in which areas are graded from A (city centres) to D (rural), plus a remote rural category in which no standards are specified. In an A risk area, three engines would be sent in response to a call and the first two would be expected to arrive at the scene of the fire within five minutes. Most deaths from fire occur in C risk areas (largely suburban residential housing) where one engine is sent to arrive within 8–10 minutes. In a D risk area, one engine would normally be sent initially and it would be expected to arrive within 20 minutes. Anyone remaining in a serious fire for over 20 minutes is very likely to

be fatally injured and the highest rates of death per head of population from fire are found in sparsely populated areas.

Standards for fire cover through a system of risk categorisation were essentially devised by Sir Arthur Dixon before and during the Second World War and remained in use until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They privileged the protection of property over saving lives, embedding this value judgement in a set of supposedly neutral, technical standards based on cost effectiveness.

Traditionally, funding from Central Government has been based on protecting buildings in city centres and subsequently has been weighted towards A and B risk areas, where the risk to property was highest. Most of the deaths and injuries caused by fire occur in the home, and ... funding has been directed towards property risk as opposed to known life risk (Isles of Scilly Fire Brigade 2003, 5).

Britain was given a system of fire cover that 'directs resources away from areas and population groups most at risk' (Independent Review of the Fire Service 2002a, para. 3.26).

Sir Arthur Dixon's original system of classification of risks which he developed as a paper and pencil exercise in 1939 was based on street mileage weighted by the element of risk. This original scheme had three risk categories. Class A covered large business premises, including large factories and retail shops. Class B covered small factories and medium-sized shops. Residential areas were relegated to Class C which also included small shops. However, a residential area could be upgraded from Class C to Class B if there was a conflagration risk which meant that fire could spread from one property to another, e.g. if an otherwise residential street had a garage in it. It is evident that this scheme emphasises the protection of commercial property.

The outbreak of war prevented this scheme from being put into effect and in 1943 Sir Arthur Dixon devised a more elaborate system of classification. One member of the Committee on the Post War Fire Service tried to advance population as a criterion which would have given greater weight to life risks, arguing that such an approach would be more acceptable to the public. The Committee, however, reflected on the priorities of the policy community whose composition was reproduced in its membership and was more concerned with 'securing a wide measure of agreement among the technicians' (National Archives 1943, 2). Sir Arthur Dixon now advanced a six-fold categorisation of risk, the first three of which were based on property risks. For example, a vital point risk referred to 'an installation, factory or other building of vital importance to the life of the community'. The fourth category does recognise the existence of a 'high life risk', an example being 'places of public entertainment, especially where there are not ample means of escape'. However, general 'population risks' were ranked fifth, with principal residential areas allocated a first attendance of 10–15 minutes (National Archives 1943, 2).

The work of the committee was reflected in circulars issued in 1947 which established six standards of cover. Each of these categories was defined in terms of a type of property (except for the residual last category) and all references to population or life risk disappeared. Class A covered areas in the largest cities 'in which

the property, by reason of its construction and/or contents, presents a serious risk of a major conflagration'. Class B covered factories, commercial premises and departmental stores in the larger industrial cities. Class C was concerned with more dispersed industrial risks, although it also reflected a preoccupation with heritage properties by covering 'the older timbered property in medium sized towns'. Residential property first appeared in Class D which included what were somewhat curiously described as 'operatives' dwellings'. Class E covered more dispersed areas of residential property where there were no serious industrial risks. Class F was a residual category covering all areas not falling into Classes A to E except remote rural areas (National Archives 1958, 9–11). These arrangements remained in place with only minor adjustments until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The standards were reviewed in 1958 and the A, B, D and E categories were merged to form a four-fold system of classification which then remained unaltered, although particular locations could be reallocated from one category to another. Despite subsequent reviews in 1974 and 1985, no further changes were made.

The approach to risk categorisation taken was based on building type, but had no mechanism for taking account of changes in building standards. Particularly after the passage of the 1971 Fire Precautions Act these offered improved fireproofing or the increased use of sprinkler systems which meant that the risk in city centres was decreasing. It took no account of the fact that populations shift from city centres to the suburbs at night or of the variations in the time it could take to reach a fire depending on the effect of road congestion on travel times at different periods of the day and at night. The standards also failed to address social equity issues in the sense that 'the risk of fire also depended on the affluence and lifestyle of the individuals concerned' (Joint Committee 1998, 4–1). This failure to initiate necessary policy change is what one would expect in a closed policy community. As the Bain Report noted, '[The Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council] spends too much time on stakeholder business to the detriment of progressing national strategic issues' (Independent Review of the Fire Service 2002a, para. 6.4). Policy reviews that have involved external actors have not worked either. 'Report after report has recommended change and modernisation. Modest changes have taken place but the major reforms required in form, function, legislative backing and management have all been neglected' (Independent Review of the Fire Service 2002b, 2). Within a highly stable policy community, policy on fire cover effectively became petrified. This observation is consistent with Marsh and Smith's (2000, 19) comment in relation to the agriculture policy community that 'despite the external pressure, the community managed to control the reform process and, thus ... the outcome of reform was a policy which continued to protect the interests of the community'.

An alternative explanation of this inability to change would be that it was a result of the absorption of the FBU in the policy process. Thus, stagnation was not the result of the existence of a policy community per se, but the fact that the unions were given an effective veto on policy change. However, the archival records suggest that the FBU was not the only conservative actor present in the policy community and that it also tended to focus on issues of particular concern to it such as the number of men sent out on an engine. The Home Office had no inclination to promote radical change in the fire cover scheme that it had devised.

There were clear tensions between the organised employers and organised labour, but to some extent these were distinct from other issues. This helps to explain why the firefighters' strike of 1977–1978 did not disrupt the policy community and lead to wider policy change. This industrial relations dispute was principally about pay in the context of government attempts to enforce an incomes policy. It led to a formula for fixing firefighters' pay that worked relatively smoothly for nearly 25 years and therefore defused major disputes about this subject within the policy community. Much of the annoyance of the firefighters was directed at the wider labour movement for failing to back them and turning the strike into a broadly based campaign against government incomes policy and also those retained firefighters who continued to work. Above all, it was felt that the National Association of Fire Officers (NAFO) gave sufficient assistance to the military firefighters to make the difference between the normal and the emergency service politically tolerable. 'If NAFO had supported the FBU, there would have been no guidance to the army, an army without guidance cannot find its way and the government would have lost (Alexander 1992, 435). Although the settlement increased the cost of running the fire service, it did not lead to major reductions in personnel or the standard of the service. As R. A. W. Rhodes notes (1986, 324), 'the fire service has been *relatively* protected from the cuts'. The 1977–1978 dispute did not take place in the context of a government that had an agenda to modernise all public services. Under New Labour the commitment to modernisation led to the establishment of the Bain Committee with effectively a mission to destabilise the policy community and introduce new thinking into its operations. What distinguished it from earlier investigations was that it had political backing at the highest level, making the fire service a matter of high politics. It thus confirms the prediction by Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 8) that 'destruction of policy monopolies is almost always associated with a change in intensities of interest. People, political leaders, government institutions which had once shown no interest in a particular question become involved for some reason'.

### **The Arrival of Change**

Baumgartner and Jones note (1993, 86): 'Just as the successful creation of a monopoly may occur with remarkable quickness, so may its destruction'. The industrial dispute in the fire service in 2002–2003 which culminated in a series of strikes and the provision of emergency cover by the armed forces led the government to initiate the independent review of the fire service chaired by Sir George Bain. Until then the fire service had been untouched by New Labour's 'modernisation' agenda, but the Bain Report set out an agenda for substantial change in return for concessions on pay. The government produced a White Paper on the future of the fire service in June 2003 (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2003). At the centre of the White Paper was the introduction of a locally responsive, risk-based approach to fire cover. The White Paper was followed by the introduction of a Fire and Rescue Services Bill in 2004, the first major legislation on fire services for over 50 years. None of the many earlier reviews of the fire service had led to change and 'there is awareness that the same fate could face the proposals outlined in the White Paper' (House of Commons 2004, 7). The fire service has proved to be relatively impervious to exogenous pressures for change, leading Bain

to call for 'a governance structure which can act as an organic "engine of change" allowing the Fire Service to grow and develop in response to future needs ... rather than being driven by central policy or external reports' (Independent Review of the Fire Service 2002b, 9). Yet, in a closed and highly technical policy community, such an approach is a recipe for incremental change or no change at all unless some way can be found of embedding a change agent in the policy community itself. Part of that process would surely be a systematic attempt to compare the cost and effectiveness of fire service provision across a number of developed countries.

The changes in fire cover arrangements may actually lead to an increase in public interest in the fire service. Public interest in the fire service has largely been confined to campaigns against station closures. However, the FBU argues that the removal of any national guidance on minimum standards based on professional and technical analysis could lead to a 'postcode-led' fire service. This sort of language has been used in the context of the NHS and does excite media attention and a public response, although the initial movement of fire appliances from central London to the suburbs attracted little attention. Nevertheless, there is a real issue about whether the new approach will introduce geographical variations in levels of cover. Moreover, 'the current nationally prescribed standards of fire cover are easy to explain, understand and apply' (House of Commons 2004, 23). It is therefore possible that changes in policy intended to protect the public and to secure greater protection from death from fire in an ageing population may actually lead to increased public disquiet about fire services as they perceive that the 'insurance' cover that is provided is diminishing, reinforced by the fact that the policy changes are intended to bring about cost savings. The unintended consequence could be to open up a closed policy community to a much higher level of public scrutiny and discussion.

## Conclusions

Attention was drawn in the introduction to the argument of Baumgartner and Jones that policy monopolies are reliant both on a definable institutional structure that is responsible for policy-making and a supporting idea associated with that institution. For over 60 years, fire service policy-making in Britain was associated with the Home Office<sup>5</sup> and an associated advisory committee structure that took the form of a committee that offered 'advice after its members have negotiated with each other' (Jordan and Richardson 1977, 42). Fire service policy-making was transferred out of the Home Office and to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Sir George Bain, who had provided the plan for the introduction of the minimum wage, was brought in to chair a committee to provide a new blueprint for the fire service. New Labour's modernisation agenda proved to be sufficiently well supported at a high political level to sweep aside the objections of the policy community and to dismantle its fire cover arrangements. This provides support for the observation that the grip that policy communities have on an issue can only be loosened by the intervention of exogenous actors with strong political backing.

The idea of a policy community and a policy monopoly was found to be analytically helpful in understanding fire service policy. It must not be assumed that as part of the shift from government to governance, looser, more open and more

transparent policy networks have always displaced more exclusive and rigid policy communities. Even where closed policy communities based on a policy consensus have become more open and subject both to external attack and conflict within the policy community itself, the original supporting ideas of the policy community may remain significant. Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 93–99) discuss the case of pesticides and show how a powerful sub-system became increasingly challenged. However, the persistent difficulties in establishing bio-pesticides as alternatives to chemical pesticides in Britain and the EU may suggest that the regulatory system still retained an ideational preference for chemical methods of pest control.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever changes occur in the future, the notion of a policy community should not be discarded from the tool-kit of policy analysts. Indeed, it can be revived if two lessons from this article are built upon. Firstly, there is particular scope for approaches that bring together historical techniques, notably the use of archival sources, to trace the development of a policy community within a conceptual framework provided by political science. The more general methodological point here is the need to deploy a ‘controlled eclecticism’ (Phillips 2004, 15) that is open to a range of methods whilst still adhering to criteria of parsimony, relevance and coherence. Secondly, the analysis of policy communities needs to pay greater attention to the need to identify ideas and policy frames that have become embedded in the policy community to the exclusion of other approaches.

### About the Author

**Wyn Grant**, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, email: [w.p.grant@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:w.p.grant@warwick.ac.uk)

### Notes

1. Based on World Fire Statistics from the September 1999 World Fire Statistics Bulletin, <http://www.geocities.com/45peter/worldFIREstats.html>.
2. Interview with fire services expert, 13 July 2001.
3. Interview with fire services expert, 13 July 2001.
4. ‘The Service went to considerable lengths to denigrate him’. (Blackstone 1957, 338) Perhaps the monocle, bowler hat and furled umbrella that always accompanied him did not give him the gravitas that he sought.
5. The Scottish Office was responsible for fire services in Scotland. The creation of the devolved administration has provided opportunities for policy innovation in relation to the provision of effective fire cover for remote and sparsely populated areas.
6. This hypothesis is being pursued in the RELU research project ‘Biological Alternatives to Chemical Pesticide Inputs in the Food Chain: An Assessment of Environmental and Regulatory Sustainability’, RES-224-25-0048.

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