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Crisis Leadership and the Art of Denial

So standard, so predictable, is reassurance from our political leaders at a time of emerging crisis it has become, paradoxically, all that is needed to convince us we are indeed tottering on the edge of the abyss. With the effects of the BSE beef crisis still fresh in memory and the recent incident at the Japanese nuclear power station likely to remain so for many years to come, a call for transparency and straightforwardness in the way political leaders communicate risk to those outside government is likely to go unanswered according to research that looks at the behaviour of leaders at such times. Attempting to understand how governments manage, justify and explain their actions when faced with the challenge of crisis management and the implications for consumers is the purpose of this brief introductory paper. Though rooted in the political sciences, the topic spans academic disciplines to embrace behavioural psychology and crisis management studies. Using two examples as a background — the British BSE beef crisis which came to a head in 1996, and to a lesser extent the Japanese nuclear plant disaster following the earthquake on 11 March 2011 — the paper looks at how the British and Japanese Governments communicated the risk factors to the public in major incidents that were separated across time, space and culture.

Of the many situations that lend themselves readily to the issues of risk and safety, nuclear power production is an increasingly obvious area for concern. The failure of the Japanese nuclear power station constructed forty years earlier in a recognised earthquake zone is the latest to give serious cause for alarm and it takes its place alongside the Three Mile Island

power plant melt-down in the US, and the explosion at Chernobyl in the Ukraine among others. The technical reasons for alarm were different in each incident but all have raised global concern and disquiet about the safety of nuclear power. The handling of the emergency at Fukushima via extensive media coverage also gave an opportunity to observe how the developing crisis situation was dealt with on a real-time day-by-day basis by the Japanese authorities. It quickly became clear that the official reassurance given at the outset would need a rapid reappraisal as to the realistic levels of danger to public health the crisis presented.[1]

Food scares too have posed a particular problem for Western governments. We take for granted that the food we buy is safe. Indeed, there are whole technologies dedicated to ensuring our food reaches the shelves of our supermarkets prepared and processed, wrapped and sealed from contamination, safe for human consumption and viable in terms of its nutritional value. But food science and technology, the potential saviour of the world's hungry and its hope for the future, also lends itself to some very dubious practices and as with nuclear power, carries degrees of risk to the environment and to public health that are difficult to estimate over the longer term. Of the various food scares over the last few decades that have weakened the level of public trust in our Government's response and the notable lack of transparency in the way it handles crisis situations, we can count salmonella in eggs, indiscriminate use of antibiotics in cattle, and concerns about genetically modified food, amongst others.[2] Of these, and arguably the most alarming to date, is the BSE crisis.

Taken together they represent at best, examples of poor risk communication between government and the public. At worst they raise issues of downplaying or of deliberately disregarding the risks to public safety in favour of the economic interests of powerful and influential industry. Whilst there is no thought or suggestion that there was deliberate disregard for public health linked with the Japanese nuclear emergency, the two incidents, BSE and Fukushima, share an important characteristic: both were met initially by official reassurance that the situation was under control when later events would dramatically show otherwise.

BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy), or 'mad cow disease', was brought to the Government's attention in the late 1980s, but it was not until 20 March 1996 that the possibility of a link between BSE and ten reported deaths from a new form of the degenerative neurological brain condition Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) was announced to the House of

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[1] J. McCurry, Japan Doubles Fukushima Radiation Leak Estimate, *The Guardian*, 8 June 2011, p. 18.

[2] Merle Jacob and Tomas Helström, 'Policy Understanding of Science, Public Trust and the BSE-CJD Crisis', *Journal of Hazardous Material,* 78 (2000), 303-317 (p. 305).

Commons by the Secretary of State Stephen Dorrell.[3] A wave of alarm hit the House, and the nation, when it was suggested that the ten deaths could be the tip of the iceberg in terms of the numbers that might be at risk from infection. For those brought up with the traditions of Sunday roast beef and a succulent steak, the news that beef might be a source of contamination was a blow to the heart of British culture.[4] More worrying still was the age demographic of the victims which included, uncharacteristically, teenagers and young people in their twenties.[5] If the new strain of CJD was linked to BSE it was clearly fast acting in the food chain.

At a press conference later that day Professor John Pattison, chair of the Government's Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), explained that the link between the new disease strain, which appeared to be invariably fatal, and BSE had been identified by the behavioural symptoms of those affected, the pathology of the disease, and the age range of the victims. Moreover, in establishing the link he was unable to rule out the possibility of an Aids-like epidemic developing which might see as many as half a million people infected at some future time.[6] Shocking though the news was, it was not so much, Jasanoff notes the year after the announcement, that British beef was fatally contaminated, nor that CJD was (so far) incurable and liable to strike with little warning, it was rather that the Government had consistently misled the public by repeatedly reassuring them from 1988 onward that beef was safe for human consumption. The message 'safe to eat' had been understood by the public to mean that BSE was not transferrable from cattle to humans.[7] Clearly this was not so.

Even then efforts continued by the Government, the industry and the supermarkets themselves who assumed a major role in risk communication, to reassure and convince the public that beef was indeed safe to eat - under certain conditions (from specialist and 'approved sources' for example). All efforts now to convince the public were futile and the sale of British beef both at home and among our European trading partners plummeted. The collapse of the industry took with it the UK's international standing as a reputable agricultural supplier, billions of pounds lost in agricultural exports, and public trust in the Government. On top of the export losses were added the costs of dealing with the crisis itself.[8] This included

3 Ibid.

4 Sheila Jasanoff, 'Civilization and Madness: The Great BSE Scare of 1996', *Public Understanding of Science,* 6 (1997) 221- 232 (p. 222).

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Jacob and Helström, p. 305; Jasanoff, pp. 224-225.

the controversial burning of cattle slaughtered in their thousands.[9] Night after night viewers of the television news channels faced the spectacle of burning cattle silhouetted against the skyline on bovine pyres. The morning newspapers carried the same sickening images. Nearly a decade had elapsed since concerns about BSE, the uncertainty of feeding practices in the industry and the possible risks attached to them were first raised with the Government.

While the circumstances differed among the various food scares that dominated the decade leading up to the BSE crisis of 1996, here too a common factor had appeared. The extent of the public concerns had been minimised in order to protect the interests of the food industry.[10] Health Minister Edwina Currie, for example, was forced to resign from her post in the late 1980s after publicly voicing concerns about an earlier scare, the scale of salmonella infection in egg production. Following the threat of legal action from the egg producers, the Government quickly stepped in to pacify the industry and to assure the public that the risks had been overstated. Although some small risk of salmonella in raw eggs was acknowledged, the official advice was that cooking would considerably diminish any risk. Although there was no support for Currie's position from the Government at the time, a later report by a working group made up from members of the Ministry of Agriculture, The Department of Health, and the British Egg Industry Council itself, found the former Health Minister's concern not to be without a basis. Britain was indeed experiencing a 'salmonella epidemic of considerable proportions'.[11]

As examples of crisis-in-waiting, the risk and uncertainty implicit in these particular environmental and food scares were notable by the way consumers were routinely reassured despite evidence of an intrinsic uncertainty, and in the way the risk was downplayed at a time when the Government could be reasonably expected to have the safety and well-being of consumers uppermost in its concern.[12]

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[9] Dr. Richard Lawson of the Green Party raised concern about the risk of burning diseased cattle. One example suggested the temperature generated in the pyres would be insufficient to destroy the infective agents. This carried the risk to individuals from smoke inhalation, and to the potential for contamination of the surrounding countryside and waterways. Lawson's paper 'Risk Due to BSE Infectivity From Burning Cattle' (pp. 1-3) is a critical review of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food document 'Assessment of Risk Due to BSE Infectivity From Burning Cattle', 8 April 2001.

[10] David Millward, 'Currie "Was Right" on Salmonella', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 December 2001, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1366276/Currie-was-right-on-salmonella.html [12/8/2011]; Richard Young, Hooked on Antibiotics-Livestock Industry, *The Ecologist*, (June 2001), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2465/is_5_31/ai_76285488/ [2/8/2011].

[11] Millward, p. 1.

[12] Jacob and Helström, p. 310.

Now we move a couple of decades to the present to find that the practice of addressing public and media concerns with a denial and reassurance response has changed little. The question of safe nuclear energy following the Fukushima earthquake in Japan on 11 March 2011 was brought sharply into focus when the terminal damage to the plant from the magnitude-9 earthquake and the resulting tsunami was met initially with official reassurance even as the world watched events unfold on their television screens, and the potential for disaster at a forty-year old nuclear plant under extreme pressures became obvious.[13]

Here in the UK the mechanism for reassuring the public that nuclear was safe was already clicking into place, journalist Rob Edwards of the Guardian reports. We understand from his enquiries that business and energy departments in the UK were already in email discussion 'behind the scenes' just days after the initial event, with the multinational energy companies, EDF Energy, Areva and Westinghouse. Not to rethink, as one might imagine, the plans for a UK nuclear future, but according to Edwards, to devise a public relations strategy 'to play down' the Fukushima accident with a view to protecting the vested interests in a new generation of nuclear power plants. The fear was the news of Fukushima would bring about an industry set-back. One unnamed official at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) is reported as writing, 'We need to ensure the anti-nuclear chaps and chapesses do not gain ground on this. We need to occupy the territory and hold it. We really need to show the safety of nuclear'.[14]

In fairness, Edwards' reports that the plans were initiated before the full extent of the Fukushima crisis became obvious.[15] Nevertheless it does raise the question of how feasible is a call for transparency and a straightforward approach in matters of potential crisis management from our leaders and their agents and institutions where vested interests are at stake. Surely there is a risk to Government credibility in uttering reassurances when events are likely to prove them wrong?

The answer, surprisingly, is not necessarily. Exploratory research carried out by Boin, McConnell and 't Hart, in a relatively unexplored field, looked at the way political leaders handle crises. Their paper *Inertia or Change? Crisis-induced Challenges for Political*

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13 McCurry, p. 18.

14 Rob Edwards, '*Revealed: British Government's Plan to Play Down Fukushima',* Guardian, 30 June 2011. http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/jun/30/british-government-plan-play-down-fukushima [accessed 27 September 2011]. pp. 1-3.

15 Ibid., p. 1.

Leaders[16] develops the argument that crisis leadership is seen in the light of a 'mission impossible'[17] with the pressure on 'to consolidate, restore and show faith in the security and validity of pre-existing social institutional and political arrangements…'[18] In other words to protect their decisions, their institutions, and their policies along with the status quo, although not necessarily in the case of some Government officials since a scapegoat, like Edwina Currie, as we shall see, is an asset in damage control tactics.

The research undertaken by Boin and colleagues suggests that the motivation for indiscriminate reassurance in the early stages of a developing crisis is a natural and obvious response to pressure from society, the media, and from the lobbyists who look to the government to restore the situation as quickly as possible when the usual routine of everyday life is threatened. Can we make sense of this with a parent-child analogy? Irrespective of the threat the initial instinct of parents in general terms may well be for overt reassurance. As a first strategy it certainly has some advantages. Denial and reassurance may well act to calm the child when an emotional response might be difficult or inappropriate to deal with. Adopted as a strategy by leaders in similar fashion it may help to avoid, for example, panic buying at the pumps and supermarkets, or in the example of Fukushima, the logistical and safety concerns associated with a mass exodus from a place of danger. Frustrating and patronising though the strategy is to those who seek a frank appraisal of the situation this theory does give an understandable rationale to an action that at first seems foolhardy. An immediate response to reassure according to Boin et al., is the norm among leaders at times of stress. [19]

While this may be sensible, even desirable, the second point to emerge focuses more on the self-interest of political leaders and the need to defend their policies and institutions from criticism while a damage control strategy is worked out. This takes time of course and it is here that reassurance is used to buy time. This approach is equally understandable but less defensible where there is a clear division of interests: the safety and wellbeing of the population against the economic interests of other groups.[20] Nevertheless it can be seen again

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16 Arjen Boin, Allan McConnell and Paul 't Hart, 'Inertia or Change? Crisis-Induced Challenges for Political Leaders' (Refereed paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Newcastle, 25-27 September 2006). pp. 1-28.

17 Boin, A., and 't Hart, P. 'Public Leadership at times of Crisis: Mission Impossible? *Public Administration Review*, 63 (2003), 544-553. Referenced in Boin et al., 2006, p. 2.

18 Boin et al., p. 2.

19 Ibid, pp. 1-28 .

20 Jacob and Helström, pp. 309-310, 312-313.

as a natural behavioural reaction where the interests of influential and powerful groups take precedence over other considerations.

There is an obvious risk attached to offering a robust assurance in uncertain times but the trick here, as Boin and his group see it, is to be creative (economic) with the truth in any rebuttal statement.[21] This arguably leaves reassurance, or dampening, as the better of two available options, 'dampening versus sustaining mass arousal'.[22] We can surmise the consequences from hereon. If fears turn out to be groundless leaders can emerge with some credit for having handled a potentially difficult situation confidently. Their policies and institutions are clearly well thought-out, appropriate and capable of handling emergency situations. Leaders will likewise appear as confident, forward thinking, in possession of the full facts, and importantly, seen to be in control. The surprise is that pleasant though it is to receive praise or credit for an action, as motivating factors they appear to come a poor second to the real concern in the game of politics: blame and how to avoid it.[23]

Boin et al. have other insights into blame avoidance. If the worst comes to the worst, for example there are strategies available that will cover the demands of a full-blown crisis that can still see governments and leaders emerging politically intact.[24] Included on the list are demands for a full enquiry (especially popular where there is some control over who is appointed to conduct the enquiry and sit on the panel). This has the advantage of allowing leaders to demonstrate a worthy determination to get to the crux of the matter by some future date through a mechanism called an *accountability process*. This involves selecting a suitable and convincing scapegoat in an ostensibly unbiased way. As we saw earlier Edwina Currie fell neatly into this role following her outspoken concern about salmonella. This approach has the advantage again of taking time during which a newly emerging political event might well come along to overshadow the problem and act to dampen down the heat.[25] A week is undoubtedly a long time in politics.

Hood, and Brändström and Kuipers [26] see further possibilities for leaders at a time of crisis. In questions of responsibility a straightforward denial is likely to win out over acknowledgement of error or guilt when governments come up against the prospect of facing

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[21] Boin et al., pp. 5, 14.

[22] Ibid, p. 2.

[23] R. Kent Weaver, The Politics of Blame Avoidance, *Journal of Public Policy*, 6 (1986) (371-398) p. 372.

[24] Boin et al., pp. 1-25.

[25] Ibid., p. 2

[26] C. Hood, 'The Risk Game and the Blame Game', *Government and Opposition*, 37 (2002) (pp. 15-37); Annika Brändström and Sanneke Kuipers, 'From Normal Incidents to Political Crisis; Understanding the Selective Politicization of Policy Failures', *Government and Opposition*, 38 (2003) (279-305).

public criticism. Successful denial is easier to achieve than might be thought. One way is to ensure agencies and institutions are kept at 'arm's length' from the heart of government.[27] As a strategy this requires some advanced contingency planning and it implies anticipation of a future need for an escape route. It is also not without associated risks. In this instance the risk applies to accusations of failing to accept responsibilities. Measuring this against the political expediency of blaming others appears to make it a risk worth taking. Rogue individuals, groups and arm's-length agencies make suitable scapegoats, but where they fail to draw the fire, out-and-out lying according to Boin et al. is a useful tactic with a well recognised place in the arsenal of blame avoidance.[28] This is an area that Oborne (2005), discusses at length in *The Rise of Political Lying* in a way that almost appears to legitimise the practice.[29] It brings to mind Charles Barsotti's well-known cartoon showing two businessmen in a bar, paraphrased here to give their words a *political* emphasis rather than on *business* as in the original: 'Get serious John, we are talking *political* ethics, not ethics'.[30]

Finally, there is the 'one-off freak event', the much-utilised 'exceptional circumstances', the 'lessons learned' and the 'never again' along with the 'could not have been foreseen'. These very usefully ambiguous expressions cover most other contingencies. In the tragic example that is Fukushima, there is plenty about the geological context of a forty-year-old plant, outdated technology and operating procedures even without the 'exceptional circumstances' provided by nature, which will no doubt be exploited to assist the nuclear industry deal with public concerns about safety.[31]

We are left to revisit the question, what hope for transparency from our leaders at times of crisis? Even while governments acknowledge and pay lip service to the concept of transparency in politics, where official and personal failures and errors exist, Boin's group found that the need to *avoid* transparency is likely to be overwhelming.[32]

The constraints anticipated by climate change conditions such as rising sea levels and diminishing viable land for agriculture have huge implications for our ability to provide sufficient food and energy for a rapidly expanding global population. There are already immense pressures on governments' across the world to consider how technology can further

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27 M. V. Flinders and M.J. Smith, eds. *Quangos, Accountability and Reform* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999). Referenced in Boin et al., p. 2.

28 Boin et al., p. 14.

29 Peter Osborne, *The Rise of Political Lying* (London: Free Press, 2005). Referenced in Boin et al., p.14.

30 Charles Barsotti 's cartoon, (no. 8562810) 'Get Serious, John, we are talking business ethics not ethics' lends itself well to the illustration of double standards where they exist.

31 Boin et al., pp. 5-6, 9-10; Edwards, pp. 1-3.

32 Boin et al., p.14.

assist for example in increasing crop yields and there are bound to be many contentious issues both of safety and of morality raised about its use. They will present many challenges for our leaders in managing the needs of both consumers and suppliers against the opportunities of new technology and the potential for risk. The practice of feeding antibiotics to livestock, for example, allows animals to be raised more intensively and therefore more productively on concrete, a practice that frees land for agriculture.[33] As consumers we may baulk at methods that demonstrate such apparent disregard for animal welfare, but we need to recognise that they can provide a powerful economic argument for meat and agricultural producers, which in turn gives a strong incentive for the industry's powerful lobbyists with the skills and motivation to manipulate political leaders and policy. BSE may have arisen as the result of a similar economic argument: that of rendering down scrapie-infected sheep as a food source for herbivore cattle.[34]

Fukushima's ageing technology failed under extreme conditions. If predictions about climate change hold true we should expect extreme weather conditions to become more frequent. Technology can be expected to play an increasingly vital role in food and energy production in the future and there will undoubtedly be other examples of dubious and high-risk practice that will also deliver unlooked-for consequences.

What we should not expect, however, if we place any dependence upon the research considered in this account is any significant behavioural change in the way governments and leaders temper their responses to future emergency situations and the way associated risks are dealt with and communicated to the general public. That this appears to hold true for leaders of two nations geographically distant, of widely different cultural backgrounds, and shows persistence over time is certainly interesting and suggests the possibility that the phenomenon may be common among leaders. But we keep in mind that the two examples in this paper fall far short of a global trend: they are merely a snap-shot observation of cases in hand and conveniently considered in the light of current research. Whether the trait for denial and reassurance is indeed a universal leadership response is not a claim tested by this account, although the self-preservation of leadership status, according to Boin et al., is one of the unwritten laws of political leadership.[35] Aspects of the 'Arab Spring' can offer some support for this particular theory. If the need to shield citizens from the truth, whether for their own good or to mask less honourable intentions is a further leadership characteristic, it is a trait that does not sit comfortably with a call for transparency or straightforwardness in risk

33 Young, p. 1.
34 Jacob and Helström, p. 303.
35 Boin et al., p. 23.

communication, the more so when powerful economic interests are intrinsically linked to decision-making in government.[36]

Where does this leave the consumer? Is it enough that we are alerted to a practice of political survival, which in many ways is a thoroughly instinctive human characteristic: that of attempting to preserve one's reputation and integrity, and not least, one's standing in society? Of course this is a trait inherent throughout the population and one we can all understand. But if leaders embrace certain policy actions to protect their interests at a cost to consumers, we need to ask what can be done to best preserve and protect the wider society.

We are far from powerless as individuals. One positive way forward is to arm ourselves against risk in areas that affect us as consumers by becoming better informed about the increasingly central role science and technology plays in our daily lives, and in developing an awareness of how our leaders are motivated to respond not only at times of crisis, but in everyday matters where they are likely to be faced on a daily basis with the conflicting interests of consumers and producers. Pattison, for example as the Governments Chief Scientific Advisor and chair of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), acted from a position of knowledge as a concerned individual in applying a common sense approach to the uncertainty surrounding BSE and stopped feeding beef to his grandson.[37]

[36] Jasanoff, p. 226.

[37] Jasanoff, p. 224.

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