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A Model of Fundamental Policy Change and a Final Test

6.1 Introduction

This book is about the explanation and prediction of the nature of fundamental policy change. In previous chapters, I argued that the concept of policy generations is a useful concept. My arguments suggest that policy generations exist and that the concept has explanatory and predictive power for the nature of policy change.

I argued that we have come a long way in explaining when policy change is likely to occur and why this is so. Based on that knowledge, I tried to move the discussion forward by proposing a model that explains and predicts the direction that such change takes. Based on sociological, cultural and economic theories, this book presents two hypotheses that help us determine which direction policy change is likely to take.

First, the theory tells us that we cannot have it all at once. Scarcity requires us to choose what to do and what not to do; this in turn implies that when one activity is emphasized, another is bound to be neglected. Second, the theory suggests that every social system requires continuous and sufficient attention to be paid to four values: problem-solving; considering short-term goal achievement; long-term effectiveness; and solving integration problems – and to implement each value in an efficient way. Furthermore, if one neglects one of these four values for too long, the urgency of that value will increase. Third, according to the theory, if problems cannot all be solved simultaneously, one has to proceed sequentially, solving one problem after another.
The resulting hypothesis expects policy change to head in the direction that has been neglected longest. The second hypothesis tells us that such policy change is visible in all established policy areas – that is, those areas that can be identified and result in public policies for at least 12 years – at approximately the same time and going in the same direction.

This is the importance of neglect. In order to predict where policies are going, we need to investigate which problem was neglected most in the preceding period. This most-neglected problem is then likely to become the problem in most urgent need of attention in the subsequent period.

Subsequently, I conducted in-depth research on long-term policy change in the Netherlands between the end of the Second World War and the start of the new millennium, and framed it within this hypothesis.

This research distinguished five periods, each defined by its own characteristics in terms of major policy goals, dominance of policy instruments used to achieve these goals and the role of different stakeholders in the policy-making process. The results of that study corroborate the hypotheses, justify that the hypotheses are worthy of wider investigation, and illustrate how such research can be conducted.

In this concluding chapter, I review and reflect on the steps taken. I start with an overview of the research and proceed with an interpretation of the research within the theoretical framework.

Many will wonder why this research ends in 2000. For many observers, the crucial question with regard to developments taking place in the Netherlands is how to explain what is going on at present. One can witness a drastic change in policies since the beginning of this millennium. Two things are most prominent and striking to outsiders: first, the tolerance for which the Netherlands was known for ages seems to be diminishing rapidly. This is especially evident in increasing intolerance towards Islamic refugees, their clothing, schools, media and mosques, indeed towards their presence itself. Second, the reputation for hospitality for which the Dutch were known is fading. We can witness decreasing opportunities for asylum-seekers to enter and stay in the Netherlands, and harsher policies designed to return refugees to their home countries. Third, the outcomes of the national elections in 2002 and 2006, in which profound changes in