The case studies that make up the heart of this volume take us a considerable distance toward answers to the general questions concerning the sources and dynamics of policy change with which we began. In addition, a number of the studies suggest the outline of a further research program, one focused on a particular mechanism of change: the role of programmatic elites. This last, we must stress, is not intended as a universal answer to the question of change; it is one mechanism among a number of others. It is, however, one that we feel to be at once important and hitherto understudied. As such it is well worth considering both what we have learned so far and where we might go to find out more. Before proceeding with this necessarily speculative conclusion, we begin by revisiting the questions and proposals with which we began.

The Story So Far

The organizing question developed in chapter 1 followed from our initial observation that the ongoing change in policy evident to the casual observer did not seem to have a clear theoretical explanation. In its first version, it simply asked:

Why does public policy in democratic regimes sometimes change in cases where neither a change in public “demand,” a “shock” of extra-systemic origin, nor a change in the underlying architecture of institutional rules can be documented? Why, conversely, do we sometimes note a remarkable degree of policy continuity despite changes in these structural variables?

The leading answers to this question in the contemporary literature, models of punctuated equilibrium and institutional evolution proved to share a number of important blind spots, among which was their largely unquestioning
incorporation of elements imported from microeconomics. On closer inspection, one problem in particular, the reification of interests, stood out. The universal assumptions borrowed from economics, in other words, could be relied on neither to tell us what actors desired (preferences) or what they truly needed (interests). This proved to be just as well because when, in chapter 2, we identified more clearly the actors whose behavior we sought to understand, conventional assumptions concerning interests and rationality were clearly unhelpful. The problem, as we redefined it, was one of motives.

Why is it that some individuals and organizations possessing the sort of power and influence necessary to make a difference in contemporary democratic societies—actors whose very position suggests that they have done well under existing conditions—actively seek to change policies or institutions?

The hypothesis reached at the end of chapter 2 proposed an answer to this puzzle along the following lines.

In addition to material or electoral gains (and perhaps in preference to these) actors in a position to be “policy professionals” seek legitimate authority over policymaking for its own sake. This brings them into competition and even open conflict with other similarly placed elite actors also seeking similar ends. The resulting dynamic of competition provides a permanent incentive for policy innovation and leads to an ongoing reassessment of fundamental interests.

The clearest route to legitimate authority, for policy professionals in contemporary Europe and North America, we concluded, was to project their ideas into the future as successful policy programs. It is not essential that all policy professionals succeed in this, or even that most make the attempt. A small but active subset at any given time is all that is required to ensure an ongoing dynamic of change. Following from this central hypothesis and its contextualization in the world of structured ideas were five corollary propositions:

- The construction of interests is not social but political.
- The dynamic of politics works continuously to undermine frames and equilibria from within.
- In any given situation, there will always be actors with an incentive for change.
- While given policy outcomes are ephemeral and to a certain extent arbitrary, the process that generates them possesses inherent regularizes that can be studied and compared.
- Policy outcomes should not be confused with institutional structures.

It is inappropriate, in light of the way this book was constructed, to ask how these propositions have fared in light of the empirical case studies that