Agenda Setting and Problem Definition

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ABSTRACT What happens after public issues attain agenda status? Exploring this question in the context of one instance of social protest in Israel, the 1990 ‘tents movement’, this paper focuses on government reaction and the way it successfully disintegrated the movement. A movement that proved strong enough to put the housing problem on the national agenda, and to keep it there for a few months, has had no influence on the subsequent treatment of this issue. Apparently, to legitimize an issue is not the same as to legitimize demands. This hypothesis is examined in a broader conceptual context, distinguishing between agenda setting and problem definition. This distinction, in turn, calls into attention the power of initial definitions of problems, and the mechanisms employed by guardians of the status quo.

Introduction

Experienced policy entrepreneurs know that today’s newspaper headlines may well become tomorrow’s fish wrappings. Anticipating agenda-setting theory, veteran protesters view media coverage not as an end, but as a means to put their claims on the agenda. Cobb and Ross (1997, p.3) characterize agenda setting as ‘the politics of selecting issues for active consideration’. But what happens after issues gain agenda status, that is, become part of ‘that set of items explicitly up for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decision makers’ (Cobb and Elder, 1983, p.86)? Would it be useful to distinguish strictly between processes that are at work before issues gain agenda status and those that enter the scene afterwards? An expansive view of agenda setting blurs the line between agenda setting and problem definition: ‘Agenda conflicts are not just about what issues government chooses to act on; they are also about competing interpretations of political problems and the alternative worldviews that underlie them’ (Cobb and Ross, 1997, pp.3–4). Agenda setting, Birkland similarly suggests (1997, p.11), is ‘the result of a society acting through political and social institutions to define the meanings of problems and the range of acceptable solutions’. A likewise expansive outlook on problem definition has a similar effect: ‘Problem definition has to do with what we choose to identify as public issues and how we think and talk about these concerns’ (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994, p.vii).

In contrast to this blurring of boundary lines, Weiss (1989, p.118) draws a clear distinction between the two: ‘Problem definition is related to, but different from, agenda setting. Problem definition is concerned with the organization of a set of facts, beliefs, and perceptions – how people think about circumstances. Agenda setting refers to the process by which some problems come to public attention at given times and places’ (1989: 118). Baumgartner and Jones (1993, pp.28–9) likewise recognize that, ‘Raising a problem to the public agenda does not imply any particular solution [. . .] The trick for a policy entrepreneur is to ensure that the solution he or she favors is adopted once a given problem has emerged on
the national agenda’. Although the way an issue gains agenda status may influence how it is subsequently defined as a policy problem, this is but one conceivable influence whose force is a matter not of definition but of empirical investigation.

To explore the relationship between agenda setting and problem definition, this paper examines the tents protest movement that took place in Israel from June 1990 to January 1991. The magnitude of this movement, its duration, and demanding character seem to have had no precedent in Israeli history of social protest. The tents movement, or rather the simultaneous seeking of housing solutions in tent camps by hundreds of families, erupted in mid-June 1990 and reached its peak within six weeks later, with over 2000 families living in tent camps across the country. Towards the beginning of the school year in September 1990, and the arrival of the High Holidays, when winter gave its first signs of approach, and Saddam Hussein threatened to blow up half of Israel, the movement showed signs of gradual evaporation. Yet, only after the first Scud missile attack on Israel (18 January 1991) were hundreds of families persuaded to evacuate the tent camps for temporary, albeit better, sheltered housing units and hotel rooms.

This story, however, is not primarily about a ‘game against nature’. Although significantly aided by external forces, government has had much to do with the evaporation and eventual termination of the tent movement. Having initially failed to deny agenda access (Cobb and Ross, 1997) to the housing issue, the Israeli government secured an impressive victory when it came to the problem definition phase. It successfully translated a broad social concern into a narrowly defined policy problem, thereby expropriating the topic from the protest movement and contributing to the movement’s disintegration. The advantage the tent protest group has had in the initial stage, of agenda-setting, to some extent through ‘issue expansion’, vanished as soon as the objective of gaining ‘active and serious consideration of authoritative decision makers’ was achieved.

The hypothesis I wish to explore with the help of this case study is that legitimizing an issue is not the same as legitimizing demands. To the extent that this is true for any mass protest, then the role of democratic participation in public policy-making would appear more restricted than that normally envisioned due to its hypothesized influence on agenda setting. Furthermore, agenda access is not the goal but potentially a means to advance one’s cause. If so, we need to be aware of the possibility that variables that enhance the likelihood of agenda success (e.g. issue expansion) may become a hindrance at the crucial stage of problem definition (e.g. a broad but hard to mobilize coalition). An explicit distinction between agenda setting and problem definition would seem warranted to better guide our observation and enhance our sensitivity to the forces that are at play after public concerns and demands are recognized as deserving government consideration.

Continuity and Change

In an engaging and inspiring collection of essays, Albert O. Hirschman advises us to respect the unpredictability of change and the way it tends to arise out of unique constellations (1995: 136); elsewhere he alludes to ‘unlikely combinations of favorable circumstances’ (1992: 174) and suggests that ‘history is nothing if not farfetched’. If we accept this view, it would then seem that neither change nor continuity is a worthy object of inquiry; change due to its unpredictable and idiosyncratic nature, and continuity due to its expected presence. Considerably more helpful is Hirschman’s hypothesis that ‘change can only happen as a result of surprise, otherwise it could not occur at all, for it would be suppressed by the forces that are in favor of the status quo’ (1995: 136). Here, continuity is not simply given but wilfully maintained. The work of these forces, that do not seem to take for granted the improbability of change, is the focus of the present inquiry.
As clearly postulated in control theory (Marken, 1990), the forces in favour of the status quo themselves need to change so as to achieve fixed results in an inconsistent or uncooperative environment. This is the underlying idea in the cybernetic model of decision making (see Steinbruner, 1974), and a similar notion has been depicted as ‘single-loop learning’ (Argyris, 1977), i.e., learning within the framework of a given set of underlying premises, rather than challenging these premises. To successfully maintain the status quo, these forces must possess some capacity to learn and adapt (see Hedberg, 1981; Deutsch, 1975; Argyris and Schon, 1996). What mechanisms do guardians of the status quo employ? The case study examined in this paper discloses one such mechanism: ‘localization’ of policy problems. By granting field officers increased discretion, and by enriching the repertoire of available responses, government seems able to effect actual change in policy outcome (for the people directly concerned) without changing overall policy. Interestingly enough, the crucial role of professional field officers in making or delivering public policy is well recognized in their capacity as ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980), but the hypothesized resulting blockage of fundamental change may have escaped our attention.

**Agenda Setting**

Where do new policies come from? Two main sets of explanations have been advanced in the literature: following Majone (1989, p.148), they are the ‘technocratic’ and ‘political’ models. The technocratic model explains policy change as the result of policymakers changing their preferences and adapting their goals to new conditions. Learning is part and parcel of the policy process (or cycle), in which policy evaluation follows implementation and precedes correction and termination (Anderson, 1976; May and Wildavsky, 1978; Brewer and DeLeon, 1983). Policy innovations are, in a similar vein, the product of evolutionary policy making where policies are seen as hypotheses, or theories, and implementation as the actual testing of policy theories (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984; Majone, 1980; Bennis, 1966; Landau, 1973). The technocratic model recognizes that non-incremental and discontinuous policies are from time to time adopted, but these are the exception rather than the rule, and are better treated by the political model.

The political model, basically seeking to explain policy development as the result of changes in the configuration of dominant interests, pursues two main lines of inquiry. One employs the notion of political innovation (Polsby, 1984), the other seeks to provide answers by focusing on agenda setting (Cobb and Elder, 1983; Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Both lines of inquiry share the somewhat implicit understanding that policy innovations are the product of the marriage between power and (otherwise sterile) ideas. Polsby has shown how the routines of politics (e.g., the yearly budgetary process, or holding elections for public office), an unexpected source of freshness, can account for the rise of new policy ideas. Presumably, people seek political office so as to introduce new ideas and innovative solutions, and if elected, they can use the power of their office to influence public policy. Secondly, Polsby’s hypothesis on the role of crisis in policy innovations seems to converge with the central tenet of agenda-setting theory, namely wide public support as a prerequisite for gaining agenda status.

Nonetheless, the fact that a given issue has gained agenda status merely tells us that there might, then, exist a ‘policy window’, ‘an opportunity for action’ (Kingdon, 1984); it does not disclose how that issue is likely to be handled, e.g., de novo, or through existing programmes and procedures. It would thus seem that the political process does one thing when it determines whether or not an expressed public concern (e.g., sharp increase in rent prices) is an issue that deserves government attention, and quite another when it determines how the same issue will be conceptualized and how subsequent action, or inaction, may be legitimized.
This is where we need the notion of problem definition, for it immediately captures the power of existing, often institutionalized, definitions (Dery, 1984a; Reich, 1988).

**Problem Definition**

In the context of policy analysis, the notion of problem definition, or problem setting, has long been instituted as the most crucial and demanding task facing the analyst (Bardach, 1996). But the different task of conceptualizing problem definition as a political process has attracted little attention (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994). The first maxim of problem definition is the recognition that problems do not exist ‘out there’, are not objectives entities in their own right, but are analytic constructs, or conceptual entities (Rein and Schon, 1977; Wildavsky, 1979; Lindblom and Cohen, 1979; Schon, 1983; Dery, 1984a; Dunn, 1988; Weiss, 1989; Weick, 1995). The second maxim suggests that definitions of problems in the context of practice must answer the criteria of feasibility and worth, or improvement. Thus policy analysis is defined as ‘creating and crafting problems worth solving’ (Wildavsky, 1979, p.389).

In policy analysis, problems are analytic constructs, in politics they are political constructs. In policy analysis the construct or definition proposed by an analyst is one of many inputs to a political process. In politics what is recognized or legitimized as the appropriate definition of a given problem is the product of the political process. But despite the differences, the concept of problems as constructs rather than givens, and the understanding that definitions of problems must embody ‘opportunities for improvement’ (Dery, 1984a) holds, whether problem definition is an input to a political process or its product. If so, then ‘selecting issues for active consideration’, which is the essence of agenda setting, must be clearly differentiated from the political process of problem definition. ‘Poverty’, ‘illegal immigration’, ‘crime’, ‘health insurance coverage’, ‘nuclear safety’, are examples of suitable answers to the question: ‘Which issues are on the agenda?’, but such answers do not reveal the slightest hint on how these issues are defined. Problem definition answers a different question, concerning ‘the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen’ (Schon, 1983, p.40). But while the analyst engages in ‘search, creation and initial examination of opportunities for improvement’ (Dery, 1984a), political actors seek to ‘sell’ the definition each favours and to influence the definition which will eventually emerge from the political process. Thus Stone (1988, p.106) understands problem definition in the political context as ‘the strategic representation of situations’, representations that are ‘constructed to win the most people to one’s side and the most leverage over one’s opponents’. According to Reich, ‘the most important aspect of political discourse is not the appraisal of alternative solutions to our problems, but the definition of the problems themselves’ (Reich, 1988: 5).

The context within which housing policy in Israel is debated and executed was established in the early 1970s and has been successfully maintained against opposition ever since. In the case study that follows, my attempt is to examine closely the way government has dealt with a significant challenge to existing policy posed by mass protest. The fact that the housing problem in this case was largely generated by government – ie its decision to assist newcomers with cash transfers at levels higher than earlier market prices – adds a touch of irony to this story. If the despair of the people is a direct outcome of government intervention in the market, one might expect to find a government that is more responsive than usual. But this causal story (Stone, 1988, Chapter 8) proved less successful than government’s urge to defend the status quo.
The Tents Protest

Background

The idea of tent protest can be attributed to one family in a small upper Galilee town, who in the beginning of June 1990 pitched a tent outside city hall. This way of solving the family’s housing problem and protesting against a desperate financial situation was reported in a television programme and was quickly adopted by many people throughout the country. In the years immediately preceding this spontaneous outburst of the so-called ‘tents protest’, or ‘Ma’abarot’,1 government aid to young couples lost much of its purchasing power. Low-income groups were first to suffer. To purchase an apartment, eligible young couples had to cover from their own resources some two-thirds of the price of a two-bedroom apartment, or the equivalent of US$40–60,000 (see Friedman, 1988; Gayer, 1991). As the number of potential buyers declined, construction companies built fewer apartments than before, causing a rise in the demand for housing rentals.

Furthermore, the housing market was unprepared for the wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union. During 1990 some 200,000 immigrants arrived in Israel, more than the total number of immigrants arriving throughout the past decade. Rents in the housing market rocketed due to a shared perception of an upcoming housing crisis, but also due to government intervention in the housing market. Government support to the new immigrants included a significant sum of money earmarked to rent payments, thus in effect instituting a minimum rent that was almost twice as high as the going rent for middle and low income housing units. Landlords, moreover, adjusted the rental conditions in keeping with the rental power of new immigrants and demanded a twelve-month rent in advance. Given this ‘perverse effect’ of government intervention in the market (see Hirschman, 1992; 1995, Chapter 2) one could argue that this is an area where government should feel particularly responsible (see Stone, 1988). However, the government primarily sought to defend its policy of preferential treatment to new immigrants (regardless of their economic status) and means-tested relief to veteran citizens. This policy has long been the source of social unrest, particularly in periods of mass immigration to Israel.

The idea of a tent solution-protest spread rapidly. The protest in the city of Rishon LeZion started with a stand to collect signatures on behalf of ‘rent victims’ (who could not compete with the rental payments the new immigrants could offer). Soon, a group of ‘mortgage victims’ joined the encampment as well as other young couples who could not pay the rent out of their salaries. In ten days the seeds of this protest turned into an encampment of 57 families. In less than a month, the country was filled with camps of self-declared ‘homeless’. At the beginning of August 1990, 1845 families populated 59 encampments in 42 towns throughout the country. The protest reached its height two weeks later, when over 2000 families lived in approximately 70 encampments.

Riding the Big Wave

For some of the families who joined the encampments, the tent was a housing solution. The alternative to living in a tent was either a monthly rent, which consumed the greater part of salary, or living with parents. For others who didn’t have an immediate housing problem, moving into tent camps was an ‘investment’: staking a claim on a tent, in the event that they did not find another solution, or if government were to give in and distribute apartments or other solutions to tent residents. A few camps were led by the organization of ‘mortgage victims’. In the great majority of the encampments, neighbourhood and political activists traditionally associated with social welfare issues were dominant. They joined the tents to lead
and fuel the protest, and to represent their respective political movements. The feeling was that the wave of immigration from Russia represented a one-time opportunity to find solutions to a host of housing-related problems. The tent protest was for all those involved, ‘rent-victims’, ‘mortgage victims’, neighbourhood and political activists – an attempt to ‘ride the big wave’.

Unable to influence the public agenda, claimants tend to tie their demands to issues that are already there. A symposium on ‘Agenda Setting, Public Policy, and Minority Group Influence’ (McClain, 1990) demonstrated again the limited access of minority groups to the public agenda. Kingdom’s portrayal of solution holders as ‘waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions’ (1984, p.173), equally pertains to people who seek to advance their cause. ‘We didn’t create the wave,’ explains a Jerusalem City Council member and leader of Ma’aberet HaKnesset (literally, ‘the Knesset transit camp’, located in the Valley of the Cross), ‘but if it gives us the opportunity to advance our cause, why not ride it?’ Riding the homeless wave provided political activists with an opportunity to demonstrate to the public and to political sponsors that they were capable of riding the wave, and of steering it.

Protest and Anarchy

The burden of dealing with the homeless encampments fell for the most part on local authorities. The initial reaction of the mayors was usually negative. They saw these incidents as disruptions and called for, or threatened, police intervention. Given that public policy in Israel is by and large shaped at the national level, whereas government ministries normally regard local authorities as ‘sub-contractors’ on their behalf (Dery and Schwartz-Milner, 1994), there was little else they could do. In the second stage, the mayors accepted the encampments. Instead of heading the struggle of central government against the encampments, an operation for which they were unequipped, the mayors turned the struggle over to the government in Jerusalem. The hostile stance toward the encampments was quickly replaced by a municipal policy designed to help the residents carry on daily activities necessary to their livelihood. This active assistance, including the supplying of tents, water, electricity, garbage collection, and bathing facilities, was provided as a gesture of good will. In return, local authorities insisted that residents refrain from violent acts and illegal housing construction. ‘Your protest is welcomed up to a point, but past that point it’s anarchy,’ said the mayor of Herzelia (Haaretz, 19 July, 1990). A similar position was voiced by the mayor of Tel Aviv: ‘I identify with the homeless and the municipality is helping them with basic necessities, but we will, under no circumstances, give a helping hand to the erection of illegal buildings and the taking over of public grounds’ (Haaretz, 3 August, 1990).

Nevertheless, in order to compete for government attention and to win a place on the agenda, there was a need to escalate the protest. As Lipsky (1968) showed, the competition for government attention is carried out through the media (see Wolsfeld, 1984; 1988). In this competition, the tent settlers received considerable press coverage by supplying ‘newsworthy material’, until violent demonstrations and suicide threats became routine and were overshadowed by other events, particularly the developments in the Persian Gulf.

In the second week of July, there were violent protests by the homeless in Jerusalem and other cities. Hundreds of demonstrators participated in disturbances, closed off main roads, attacked and wrestled with policemen, and smashed the windshields of police cars. The violent struggle of the camp settlers spread to include suicide attempts, various threats of ‘exit’ (e.g. returning of identity cards and Army Reserve papers, appeals to foreign consulates, see Hirschman, 1970), demonstrations, blocking of traffic, breaking into apartments and public buildings, burning tyres and rubbish bins, and hunger strikes. Residents in the Bat-Yam encampment provided a somewhat extreme example of violent behaviour. Seventy
demonstrators gathered on the roof of the municipality building and threatened to commit suicide if the Housing Minister would not come and meet them. During the demonstration, two Molotov cocktails were thrown. The demonstrators declared that they were armed with firebombs, gas canisters, and tyres. ‘For three weeks we’ve been here and nobody’s come,’ explained the spokesman (Haaretz, 19 July, 1990).

During the month of July 1990, Knesset Member Michael Eitan conducted a series of visits to the homeless encampments on behalf of Mr Sharon, the Minister of Housing and Construction. In his report to Minister Sharon, Eitan stated that a delay in finding housing solutions to part of the encampment occupants might well lead to outbreaks that would bring catastrophe. According to Eitan, ‘The moderate leadership is losing restraint, and a militant leadership is replacing it’ (Haaretz, 31 July, 1990). Prime Minister Shamir asked the homeless to be patient and not to give in to violent provocation (Haaretz, 23 July, 1990). The police, who until then had practised restraint, decided to press charges for unlawful gathering. The Minister of Police stated that, ‘Despite the understandably severe distress of the homeless, they must understand that their protest, however painful, must be kept within the boundaries of the law, to preserve public order and normalcy within the state’ (Haaretz, 1 August, 1990).

At the end of July 1990, the residents of the Rose Garden tent camp in Jerusalem broke into the Absorption Center (for new immigrants) in the neighbourhood of Gilo. The squatters found in the Center many vacant apartments that needed considerable repair work, and were considered unfit for living. The Jewish Agency, which is responsible for this Absorption Center, and the Housing Ministry gave in and decided to allocate the vacant apartments in the Center to the homeless, but insisted that the apartments be given only to those eligible according to the accepted criteria, not to law-breakers. They demanded that the squatters leave the area and registered a complaint with the police. Yet despite this initial reaction, an agreement developed through which the Absorption Center provided housing solutions to 97 squatter families.

Soon came a plan to whitewash the illegal break-in. The instruction given from ministerial level was ‘to legitimize, find a way’. It was clear that ‘no minister would go and forcibly evacuate 100 families’, explained a senior official, and a way was found: squatters with eligibility documents were offered a rental contract. Couples with no children were asked to vacate the larger apartments on behalf of families with children and were housed, legally, in smaller apartments. ‘Crime pays,’ concluded a senior official in the Housing Ministry. Studying the politics of provocation in Israel, Wolfsfeld commented: ‘Despite the fact that a significant number of [protest] groups carry out acts which are illegal or violent, few suffer any consequences. The authorities have contributed to the spread of cynicism by making “deals” with protest leaders to ensure peace’ (1988, p.163).

Stretching and Bending Eligibility Criteria

The tolerance toward the squatters was consistent with the overall policy of stretching and bending eligibility criteria so as to individualize the protest and lead to its disintegration. The tension between participation in a social protest and addressing personal concerns was the key to the dissolution of the tent protest. Government intervention on the individual level, offering immediate aid to the eligible, created a conflict between the interests of the individual family seeking relief, and those of the protest leaders who sought a more meaningful victory, basically the recognition of a right to decent housing for all. Tangible ‘solutions’ to the needy overpowered the idea of social protest and policy reform. The protest ingredient in the tent movement soon disappeared, leaving the scene free for negotiations and deals between tent residents and government officials on the terms for each family’s evacuation.
The report that Knesset Member Michael Eitan submitted to the Housing Minister determined to a large extent the line of treatment of the protest by the administration. In the report, Eitan recommended acting first to find immediate solutions for the homeless who suffered from additional troubles, not the ‘net homeless’. The instruction administrators received from the political level was to ‘liquidate the tents’, that is, without changing its overall policy of preferential treatment to new immigrants and means-tested help to veteran citizens. The working assumption was that treatment on a family-by-family basis would bring the movement to an end. The movement’s leadership foresaw this, but their influence on their followers ceased as soon as housing solutions for the eligible were proposed. ‘The government injected poison into the camps,’ said one leader. This ‘poison’ individualized the protest movement and turned it into a crowd of families seeking immediate relief.

In Jerusalem, the Deputy Director General of Prazot (a public housing company for the needy, jointly owned by the government of Israel and the City of Jerusalem) was appointed to the position of ‘Head of the team for dealing with the tents’. Prazot’s ongoing tasks had to do with the housing problems of needy families that required special treatment, beyond the standard mortgage subsidy given to young couples. Thus the message conveyed in this assignment of the problem of tent dwellers to Prazot and other welfare agencies was that there is no housing problem, far less a crisis, but rather underprivileged families with a housing problem (among other troubles).

However, there were many ‘multi-problem families’ who were not eligible for assistance according to the accepted criteria of the Housing Ministry and of Prazot. The task was, therefore, ‘to stretch the criteria’. In the first stage of the operation, Prazot located the files of single-parent families and young couples with three or more children who had appealed the decisions of the company. ‘Those who appeal show greater signs of distress than those who sit quietly,’ explained the official in charge. They found 150 files, only a portion of which referred to camp residents. After a second investigation, using more flexible criteria (fewer children), 18 families were found eligible for what was called ‘social rent’ (subsidized rent for life, an arrangement that most of encampment residents would have liked to receive). The stretching of the criteria included raising the maximum allowed monthly income from 1400 NIS to 1800 NIS (about US$450–600), and recognizing a right to assistance for families with five children or more who in the past had owned an apartment. An expression of the talent for bureaucratic innovation can be found in the term ‘apartments not for those eligible’, meaning public apartments for non-eligible families as if they were eligible.

In the final stage of this operation, it was decided to ignore the criteria that determine eligibility for rent subsidy and to give the subsidy to all tent dwellers who were ‘truly’ homeless (those who had never owned an apartment). With the aim of getting rid of the tents, Prazot offered subsidized hotel rooms as a temporary solution to all 150 families who had appealed, as well as to all tent dwellers, ‘without criteria’. The Prazot Budget Summary for fiscal year 1990–1 provides a formal recognition to this policy of criteria-stretching. According to this report, ‘Prazot, together with the Ministry of Housing and Construction and under its direction . . . did its best to find a solution to those families they found eligible, while stretching the criteria in a very significant way’ (p.12).

This policy of criteria-stretching was implemented across the country. Line officers were given considerable discretionary powers as to eligibility decisions and were equipped with a new set of housing ‘solutions’ – hotel rooms, increased loans and rent subsidies, and caravans. According to a senior executive, the housing officers at the local level ‘gave in to pressures and stretched and bent the criteria. Their target population was not just any homeless families. Their idea was not to find a just solution, but to quiet those who lived in the tent encampments, those who demonstrated and appealed’. The Homeless Coordination Committee criticized the Housing Ministry for ‘supplying solutions only to “welfare families” and
not dealing with people who work and who have run into problems only recently because of rising rent’. According to one member of the coordinating committee, ‘This segment of the population consists of more than half of the protesters and, in fact, the protest began with them. But this segment remains without a solution’ (Haaretz, 25 July, 1990). A neighbourhood leader expressed a similar complaint: ‘The criteria of the Ministry are not acceptable to us. Those who have received apartments or rent subsidies are drug addicts, released prisoners, or divorcees with children. The average young couple does not qualify under the conditions of the Housing Ministry’ (Haaretz, 2 September, 1990).

**Gradual Evaporation**

Towards the end of August 1990, newspapers reported daily on homeless families who were leaving the encampments. ‘In the first month, there were hundreds of us,’ a homeless leader recalls. ‘Now things are going downhill. There is mistrust in the encampments. One person is afraid that another will steal away his apartment. People are giving up and leaving’ (Haaretz, 24 August, 1990). Another settler said, ‘We’re like one big family and people help each other. But when someone is offered a housing solution, suddenly the group solidarity breaks down and there is jealousy’ (Haaretz, 25 December, 1990).

Five months after the spontaneous outburst of the tent protest, one reporter pointed to a movement ‘which had evaporated’ (Haaretz, 28 December, 1990). Out of the 2000 families, 234 families were left in 12 encampments. According to the Housing and Construction Ministry, housing solutions were found for 1021 families (719 families received rent subsidies, 318 families were given ‘social rent’ – a permanent rental solution in publicly owned apartments – and 34 families were granted increased loans). The rest were sent to hotels or left the encampments of their own free will.

Ma’aberet HaKnesset was one of the last encampments to ‘evaporate’. Its leadership actively objected to every attempt on the part of the administration ‘to dismantle the protest by means of futile solutions’. Housing officials were not allowed to enter the camp to negotiate with residents; ‘It’s all for one and one for all. It’s not a question of your apartment, but a question of principles,’ declared one leader. But even the strong leadership of this encampment could not continue to guide the tent settlers when a housing solution might be at stake. The success of the break-in at the Absorption Center in Gilo attracted many Ma’abara residents who left and joined the squatters. The start of the school year, the coming of the High Holidays, the bitter cold of the Jerusalem winter, and the threats of Saddam Hussein seem to have joined forces with the government policy of criteria-stretching to individualize the struggle and terminate the tents movement.

On the night of the first Iraqi missile attack (18 January, 1991) 24 families stayed in Ma’aberet HaKnesset in Jerusalem and were evacuated to the adjacent Israel Museum; the following day they were taken to hotels. On that night 265 people were still living in the Tel Aviv encampments. About a dozen families persisted in a few tent camps in the Tel-Aviv area, forgotten, until a new municipal evacuation operation began, in July 1991, and brought back the television cameras. Given that housing policy has remained intact ever since, ‘the problem’ as understood and advanced by protesters did not vanish. ‘The problem’ as understood and defended by government officials was effectively resolved, although no claim is made that this will put an end to new demands and protests.

**Conclusion**

The success of the protest group at the agenda-setting stage did not entail influence on the outcomes of the policy-making process. Whereas the housing issue was legitimized, the
demand for a radically different housing policy was utterly frustrated. By drawing an explicit distinction between agenda setting and problem definition, we render mixed results of this kind unsurprising. While government appears vulnerable to popular demands at the agenda-setting stage, particularly if these attract a broad coalition of dissatisfied citizens, the next stage of problem definition symbolizes the vulnerability of protest groups to government manipulation. Given the ‘free-rider’ problem and the ensuing difficulties for organizing and maintaining mass protest (Olson, 1965), it is unlikely that what initially holds various protest groups together would endure and continue to have impact after their concerns are recognized as deserving government consideration.

Democratic participation may be envisioned as a relay race. Protesters in this race can at best force their issue into the hands of a reluctant government (agenda-setting), but to satisfy their demands they must win a different sort of battle (problem definition), one for which protesters are normally ill-equipped. In this case, the Israeli government managed to disaggregate the overall demand for a new housing policy, by defining the problem in terms of housing conditions for the extremely needy. The problem has thus come to be ‘owned’ (Gusfield, 1981) by those (ie municipal welfare agencies) who deal with people on welfare and have virtually nothing to do with national or local housing policy.

What happens after issues gain agenda status? The fact that a given issue has reached the public agenda tells us that there might exist an opportunity for action – but what sort of action? We are in no position to know, unless we further examine the fate of issues after they have reached the official agenda. Democratic policy-making processes may have been designed for perpetual negotiations, where the outcomes of any one stage are not allowed to fully determine the outcomes of subsequent stages. The present paper has concentrated on one ‘pair’ of consecutive stages – agenda-setting and problem definition. To the extent that this indeterminate relationship holds for other stages in the policy process (eg decision-making and implementation, see Nakamura and Smallwood, 1980; or evaluation and termination, see Dery, 1984b), it would seem advisable to further explore the notion of ‘perpetual negotiation’ and its implications for public policy-making.

Note
1. Ma’ahara is literally a transit camp, but in the Israeli context the term is quite loaded. It connotes the ill absorption and discriminatory policies towards Jews from Arab countries (Sephardim) in the early 1950s, allegedly the main source of the ethnic gaps that are still present. Most tent dwellers in 1990 were, in fact, descendants of the first generation of Sephardi immigrants.

References


