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### Managing a political crisis after a disaster: how concern assessment can address the political aspects involved in framing a solution

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## **Managing a political crisis after a disaster: how concern assessment can address the political aspects involved in framing a solution**

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The risk framework developed by the International Risk Governance Council includes a 'concern assessment' in parallel to the more conventional risk assessment. This factor in risk analysis has had a low profile, but this paper argues that it could be a vital factor in managing a political crisis in reaction to a disaster. The Dutch Government's 'Risk and Responsibility' programme focuses on the tendency of politicians to resort too easily to over-regulation as a response to disasters and the use of concern assessment could provide a way of providing a political analysis of the issues involved. Responses to disasters require good risk analysis, but when there is high public anxiety as a result of the incident then that anxiety is itself an issue, especially for politicians, and requires a different approach than a technical, evidence-based rational analysis. The anxiety is a combination of concerns and requires both analysis and assessment. The anxiety may be an integral part of the main issue or may develop into a parallel issue. Politicians need to understand the nature and strengths of the concerns and consider them alongside more technical recommendations for action. The paper proposes that the concern assessment should lead to a concern response, which should be a political value statement. Rather than announcing a process or a solution, the political value statement should respond directly to the concerns expressed through the public's anxiety and identify the main values or outcomes that any solution should provide.

**Keywords:** risk; regulation; concern assessment; public anxiety; IRGC risk framework

### **Introduction**

This paper looks at part of the problem that is central to the Dutch Government's 'Risk and Responsibility Programme', which tries to find alternatives to over-regulation as a response to natural disasters or tragic accidents. Framing a response to the disaster is usually complicated by high levels of public anxiety which can themselves become a political issue. Conventional risk analysis may undervalue that aspect but the International Risk Governance Council risk framework includes, in parallel to a risk assessment, a 'concern assessment'. The paper develops the application of this concept to the sort of situations arising after a disaster and argues that

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a concern assessment is an essential political tool in presenting to Ministers a full analysis of the issues. Finally, it argues that a 'concern response' needs to be framed in the form of a political value statement, which connects directly to the concerns expressed through the public's anxiety and provides political leadership in emerging from the crisis.

### **What is a concern assessment?**

The situation envisaged is not an uncommon one. It may be called a 'political crisis' in so far as its main characteristic is heightened public anxiety over a particular issue. In most cases, that anxiety will have been triggered by the graphic reporting of a tragic incident, probably involving death, either of a large number of adults or a small number of children. The origin may be acute but occasionally public anxiety can develop in slower time and perhaps with less drama, such as the case of Q-Fever. What makes this a political crisis rather than the routine challenge to the policy-maker's skills in the normal course of life is the heightened public anxiety. This is significant because, in a democratic society, the mere fact of heightened public anxiety over an issue is an issue in itself, requiring an appropriate response from government. The challenge for the policy-maker is how to advise the Minister and the challenge for the Minister is how best to provide political leadership.

In such a political crisis, the public anxiety is usually an integral part of a larger issue. But, there are another two possibilities:

- It may indeed be the only part of it. That is, the crisis may exist solely as an issue of public anxiety. The situation may have been tragic but it was a wholly freak situation unlikely to recur and there is no need to take any further action to try to prevent a recurrence. Perhaps it was a situation where all systems already in place were adequate in the normal run of events but proved inadequate in a highly unusual situation. It may be that all that is required is a response of sympathy and compassion, allowing everyone to grieve and move on. At the level of regulation, awareness of a correct application of the existing safety regulations may need to be improved. If that is all that is needed, it could go very badly wrong if instead it led to a new regulatory regime as in the case of many earlier examples.<sup>1</sup>
- Alternatively, rather than being the only part of the crisis or an integral part of the crisis, it may become a parallel crisis, with its own dynamics and its own consequences. This would be seen retrospectively as political mishandling of the situation, such as the Brent Spar incident where there was no particular need for a technical solution but the government underestimated the strength of concern, which rebounded through socio-economic consequences in continued unrest and significant economic damage to the oil company involved. Even if the concern starts as an integral part of the crisis, its resolution may need to be treated separately from the technical issue.

There is a significant danger that in a situation like this too much stress is placed on the importance of rationality. A rational assessment of the situation may show that the risk that has been revealed is small or can be resolved effectively and inexpensively. The temptation then is to dismiss the levels of public concern as irrational and emotional. The drive for evidence-based policy-making has much to commend

it but it is dangerous to characterise a situation in binary terms of reason and emotion. In that combination, ‘emotion’ is faintly derogatory. If the balance were to be expressed as ‘reason and beliefs’ or ‘reason and values’, a more realistic picture would emerge. Few people are driven solely by reason but more often by a combination of reason, beliefs and values (and, to be fair, baser emotions as well).

The existence of the heightened levels of anxiety may have a message for the policy-maker and government that it is important to understand if the situation is to be resolved successfully:

- The issue may not be an emotional one or a rational one but actually a moral one. If the anxiety is over the placing of an incinerator or some other unwelcome potential danger in a community, the issue may be less about risk and more about values. If the question is ‘why do you want to cite this dangerous facility in my town?’, it is not an appropriate answer to say ‘because the risk is low’. The issue is why one community has been singled out as against another community, which is neither about compassion nor about risk.
- In another situation, the public themselves may be slightly confused as to why they are anxious and can only explain that, somehow, ‘it just not does not feel right’. It may be a weak signal of an emerging moral or political issue. It may just be a conservative reaction to innovation or it may also be a warning to policy-makers that this issue may be the next GMO or nanotechnology dilemma. Or it may signal a shift in societal values where something is no longer acceptable.

### **The IRGC risk framework**

What emerges from this is that it is extremely important for the government to correctly characterise the nature of the issue confronting it. In terms of the risk framework devised by the IRGC,<sup>2</sup> this is expressly covered as the first stage in handling the risk, which the framework describes as ‘problem framing’. This the authors of the framework described as ‘pre-assessment’ before getting to the stage of appraisal. Problem framing leads to the choice of the appropriate discourse to use when engaging with the public. It may call for compassion or for action or for moral judgement but, above all, it calls for honesty and transparency. The consequences of getting it wrong could be the mishandling of the crisis and damaging political, social or economic consequences. The safest course in that situation is to respond with compassion and sympathy since that may turn out to be all that is needed and, in any event, can hardly be seen as inappropriate. It may also be enough to buy much-needed time in order that a more thorough analysis can take place. Where that can present a problem is where the temperament of the Minister finds it difficult to express compassion other than through action. It may be that some of the early over-reactions to tragedies were simply because the particular Minister could not find another way of expressing what may be seen as ‘softer’ emotions.

The importance of this parallel or integral element of public concern alongside the technical questions of risk is recognised in the IRGC framework at the stage of appraisal. In addition to the traditional risk assessment, it also proposes a ‘concern assessment’. As the name suggests, this is a parallel assessment of the concerns that are being expressed by the public or by relevant stakeholders. In good rational fashion, the IRGC framework refers to this as risk perceptions, social concerns and

socio-economic impacts. All that is valid but, in addition, there may also be a need to assess moral values, challenges to religious faith or the emergence of far-right radical sentiment. In any of these cases, the concern is clearly a matter of political relevance. It may have little to do with the answers a technical risk assessment can provide and that is why it is important to see two parallel (or perhaps integrated) issues that need to be addressed by government. The ‘emotional’ aspect is neither an add-on nor trivial.

What the framework fails to provide is guidance on how to carry out a concern assessment and this is addressed through the following questions:

- how do we identify concerns in order to assess them;
- once concerns are identified, how should they be assessed;
- what methodologies are there for a concern assessment; and
- how do we frame a concern response?

### **How do we identify concerns, in order to assess them?**

The press and media reaction will express anything from mild disapproval to indignant outrage but either may be a poor reflection of the actual mood of the public. Checking whether the news story gathers momentum, however, is worth looking at and tools such as Google News can help in identifying the number of times the story is run. Social media may be a more accurate reflection of levels of concern, albeit within particular groups, and there are again tools available for measuring the extent of social media activity. It is also worth noting any observable behaviours, particularly in terms of purchasing choices and mass activity. If a large number of people start buying up food supplies, getting into their cars and leaving the country, there is likely to be a message there for government! At a less dramatic level, a noticeable drop in the normal level of sales of a product may indicate a concern about its safety or desirability. Finally, there may be very visible behaviours, as in public demonstrations or even riots. In short, there is quite a wide range of methods for identifying levels of concern.

But the problem with concern may also be that there is not enough concern, indicating that the public are unaware of a very real danger which will have an impact on them sooner or later. The classic example, of course, is climate change but it will apply to any ‘slow burn’ crisis where the damage is statistically predictable without knowing at what point in the future it may occur. Concern can be a platform for legitimate political action and can provide momentum for change, and therefore can be a positive social force. Where change is needed on the basis of scientific evidence but there is a lack of social concern, effective action against the danger may be all the more difficult and may even lead to widespread resistance to the changes, which the scientific analysis suggests, are needed. The concern assessment, therefore, need not always be looking at growing concern but may also look at an unwelcome lack of concern.

### **Once concerns have been identified, how should they be assessed?**

It is worth identifying the following aspects since each will determine appropriate responses:

- Is the concern spontaneous or is it being manipulated by special interest groups for political purposes? Astute political operators will look for advantage in any crisis, and therefore there is likely to be some element of manipulation. If a particular technical or regulatory solution is being suggested before a proper analysis has been made of the situation, there may be some vested interest involved. It is worth finding out why specific solutions are being advocated without apparent interest in investigating the true nature of the problem. But, the level of public concern may be sufficiently spontaneous and extensive that it is 'genuine' and transcends the efforts of particular groups to profit from it.
- Is the concern a call for action or a call for compassion (or even both)? This is a particularly important distinction to make in terms of an appropriate response. It is likely that a compassionate response should be made in most cases anyway, whether or not any further action is needed. It may prevent further social amplification of the concern if it is seen that the government has 'got the message'. It may, therefore, buy much-needed time for a more scientific assessment of the risk.
- Is the concern broadly based across society or is there a differential impact? It may be that the concern is very strongly felt and spontaneous with one particular group but of little interest to anyone else. That may still require action but it may also indicate some political challenges in how to respond in a balanced way.
- A more extreme version of the last case is looking at whether the concern is a matter of consensus or conflict. The concern may be dividing society rather than uniting it. That is, different groups may have opposing concerns, especially where religious issues are involved such as building mosques, which takes the issue very much into the political arena.

### **What methodologies are there for carrying out a concern assessment?**

The simplest 'methodology' is political intuition. A good politician will have a 'feel' for the concern, what it signifies and what an appropriate response would be. However, political intuition can also be disastrously wrong.

Focus groups could help in analysing the concern. The focus groups used in the ethical exploration by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture tried to get behind the expressed emotions to analyse underlying values or beliefs as the basis of the anxiety (Ministry of Agriculture 2011). This approach could help in identifying the extent of the political problem but it will depend on having the right membership of the focus group. Focus groups can be set up quickly and provide results quickly, but choosing representative members may take longer. A focus group may be asked what advice they would give the Minister. However, social media may be invaluable in the situation where focus groups may already exist as listservs or discussion groups, or even just communities of interest. If there is time, surveys and questionnaires and other market research techniques could be applied.

Another methodology is to make tentative responses or interventions and observe the response. The classic way of dealing with complex adaptive systems is to make small interventions and see how the system adapts to them. At its simplest level, this

includes a fairly immediate compassionate and sympathetic response from government. As has been mentioned above, this may turn out to be all that is needed and, to that extent, an example of this methodology. For instance if a train crashes, immediate actions such as technical fine-tuning or enhancing awareness of safety procedures may be enough to restore safety to its required level. This may then lead to a situation where there is no need for large-scale and costly technical solutions that some considered necessary immediately after the incident.

### **How to frame a ‘concern response’?**

Within government, all these considerations eventually come down to recommendations to Ministers. Essentially, the concern assessment translates the technical issues into political issues. The technical options will be assessed on their technical merits rather than political merits. Financial considerations will most likely be included in the technical recommendations. But the technical recommendations should have a parallel commentary on the political or socio-economic impact of these options. For example, one technical option may be clearly preferable from a rational point of view but could risk alienating an entire community within society. Concern can quickly lead to upset and politicians will always be sensitive to that.

There could be tensions between concern assessment and technical recommendations. A sound advice would include the possible effects of following either or both recommendations. Without a concern response, further progress along well-considered lines may grind to a halt. A concern response gives a Minister a wider perspective, so that he can steer clear of some standard reflexes and prepare the ground for a reasonable response which is also acceptable to the public.

What may be needed as a concern response is a political value statement. One of the best was seen on the day that London was hit by a series of terrorist bombs on public transport in 2005. This triggered not only heightened public concern but also safety procedures by the public transport operators, including a requirement to check all railways tracks in a process that could take two days and strand 2.5 million people in central London. A clear message then went out from the political leadership – ‘London remains open’. This is a prime example of a political value statement which encompasses the concerns, is stated as an outcome rather than a process and responds to the concerns. The underlying value in this case is courage and the refusal to let the public system be uprooted by terrorists. In Spain, the Prime Minister made a similar statement after the Madrid bombings. There are times that the political leadership needs to respond with a statement of values rather than of process or action. Particularly in a crisis, statements of process or action are likely to be too rushed and misguided anyway.

What the public concern is looking for is a response at the level of values. If the concern has split communities, or if a particular group is in danger of being ostracised, the political value statement may be about tolerance. Where the source of concern is a tragic event, the political value statement may just be compassion and sympathy. Where the concern is about uncertainty, the value to be promoted is return to normality. At the minimum, it demonstrates engagement and, at best, it captures and steers the concerns in a more positive direction. It is not a decision or a resolution in terms of action, but creates the political environment for making any further decisions.

### Postscript – decision-making

After the risk/concern assessment, the IRGC framework moves on to the stage of decision-making. It is interesting that it frames that decision as to whether the risk is acceptable, tolerable or unacceptable. These categories are in the lexicon of risk management but also very much in the lexicon of concern. Whether something is ‘tolerable’ is actually more of a political question than a technical one. There may be statistical parameters which separate out acceptability, tolerability and unacceptability, (Health and Safety Executive 2001) but Ministers will automatically see these categories in terms of public reaction rather than statistical probabilities. ‘Acceptable’ invites the question ‘to whom? (Roodenrijs et al. 2013)<sup>3</sup>. In a political crisis, the audience addressed is not statisticians or technocrats but the general public. A concern assessment and appropriate concern response tests that issue of acceptability, and is therefore central to the issue.

At some point, the political leadership will have to make clear that accidents cannot always be avoided. Any number of measures may enhance safety a bit further, but there is also the matter of proportionality. If safety measures cost too much or infringe too much on civil liberties in relation to their benefits, they may not be advisable. That money could save many more lives if applied elsewhere.

### Notes

1. For example, the UK’s Adventure Activity Licensing Authority for school trips, following a tragedy in 1993 when some children drowned in a boating activity in Lyme Bay; see generally (Better Regulation Commission 2006).
2. The IRGC produced a conceptual framework for risk management in 2005 which has often been used in Dutch Ministries as a tool (IRGC 2005).
3. See (Roodenrijs et al. 2013) a study of the application of the IRGC framework in the handling of two infectious disease outbreaks which identified the lack of stages of problem framing and of concern assessment in the case of Q-Fever as of some significance in how they developed.

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