

1 April 2022

Muddling through?

ONE WAY TO MAKE PUBLIC POLICY

What is 'muddling through'?

Muddling through (or what academics call 'disjointed incrementalism') recognises that government policymaking can be slow, incremental and deeply pragmatic, **characteristics many public servants recognise!**

Importantly, it also shows that these aspects of policymaking are often appropriate, even desirable.

Charles E Lindblom coined the term 'muddling through' in 1959. The idea has stood the test of time, with many academics and practitioners drawing on it to describe or understand policy processes. As a model, it is often seen as the principal alternative to more 'rationalist' models like the policy cycle [<link>](#). In fact, both approaches are often seen in policy processes – something Lindblom himself later argued.

For many public servants, 'muddling through' feels 'right'. They see it as a good description of their day-to-day experience of policy making. Government often takes small steps to improve existing programs and policies, so it can change direction with relatively little political pain or budgetary cost, if something untoward happens. Muddling through recognises:

- existing policy settings are important in considering future settings
- there are many competing interests and goals that need to be carefully balanced – a big change can unfairly advantage one group or outcome over another
- many policy problems are highly complex and we can't be certain that a large scale change won't result in dire unintended consequences.



What's a practical example of muddling through in action?

Often governments run trials or pilots of new policy ideas, to see if they work and to garner public support before a full scale roll-out. The Try, Test and Learn Fund, administered by the Department of Social Services, trialled new or innovative approaches to assist some of the most vulnerable in society onto a path towards stable, sustainable independence. The trials allowed a range of ideas to be tested in limited circumstances, with those that worked best considered for more extensive application.

How can muddling through be employed by public servants?

- By proposing small step changes or limited trials, so as to reassure decision makers that they are not being asked to do something that can't be changed if it doesn't work out
- By limiting the options being examined to those that are 'realistic', ie are not major departures from existing programs or practices
- By identifying a general direction for change, but focusing detailed analysis and recommendations on initial steps towards reform, without committing government to unsustainable or inflexible policy positions.

References

- CE Lindblom, 1979. 'Still muddling, not yet through'. *Public Administration Review*, November/December, 517-526.
- T. Mercer, 2021. 'What can policy theory offer busy practitioners? Investigating the Australian experience', Ch 3, *Learning Policy Doing Policy* Mercer et al (eds).

CONTENT PROVIDED AND CREATED BY AUTHORS:

Dr Trish Mercer, Visiting Fellow, Australia and New Zealand School of Government, Canberra Office.
Dr Russell Ayres, Adjunct Associate Professor, University of Canberra.

ACCESS THE

 FREE downloadable book

press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/anzsog/learning-policy-doing-policy