

However, Lindblom argues that an unequal distribution of power in politics is not a good enough reason to reject 'partisan mutual adjustment'. A more centralized system may not redress this balance of power: 'strong central authority can be – and historically is, in case after case – an instrument for protecting historically inherited inequalities' (1979: 523). Indeed, the appearance of a comprehensively rational process may be used to minimize public, parliamentary and pressure group attention to inequalities. This allows us to revisit Dror's argument that incrementalism legitimizes the status quo: putting power in the hands of the few does not guarantee that it will be used wisely and in the spirit of benevolent neutrality that comprehensive rationality assumes.

### **Incrementalism: is it a universal phenomenon?**

Incrementalism was based initially on a study of US politics, so how relevant is it to policymaking as a whole? The general themes are universal because they are based on a departure from comprehensive rationality. Further, as Lindblom (1979: 520) suggests, we should not confuse the advantages of incrementalism in politics (the management of policy by consensus and the minimization of unintended consequences) with inertia in politics (made more likely by the veto points in particular political systems combined with 'timidity' and 'ideological conservatism'). In other words, we need to separate the identification of inertia and veto, which may afflict some particular systems more than others, from the concept of incrementalism that may be applicable to all systems (compare with the discussion of policy styles in Chapter 4).

Commentators in the federal US, with a formal separation and devolution of powers, often refer to the UK's centralization of power as a source of much needed policy change (compare with Box 5.3). Hayes (2001: 2) outlines Burns' (1963) suggestion the US should be more like the UK, with: a two-party system and clear competition based on distinct manifestos, a winning party with a clear majority and therefore a legitimate mandate to introduce its policies, and a system which has more top-down levers and fewer checks and balances. In other words, the main hindrance to legitimate and swift policy change is the structure of government.

A similar rhetoric is found in 1990s discussions of Japan's political style – if Japan emulates the 'Westminster model' then it can address widespread inertia within the political system and re-establish faith in its politicians (Krauss and Pekkanen, 2004). In Italy and Germany there are fewer explicit references to Westminster, but similar criticisms of political systems which were once 'stable' but are now 'stagnating'. In Italy, 'institutionalists' pointed to the value of a consensual system of govern-

### Box 5.3 The shifting image of majoritarianism

A significant irony, given the pro-Westminster rhetoric in the US and Japan, is that the opposite rhetoric was used in the 1990s to support political devolution in Scotland. A series of measures to link politics with the 'people' were devised, with the Scottish Parliament acting as a hub for new forms of engagement and a counterweight to strong central government; this new form of politics was designed to downgrade the role of political parties and reduce their ability to change policy radically in the absence of consensus. The Scottish experience was borne out of frustration with the Westminster model and the negative effect that top-down policy making had on public perceptions (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008; Jordan and Stevenson, 2000).

ment only when the country was deeply divided (in the aftermath of the Second World War and in the wake of the cold war). However, when policy conditions changed, the institutions of government did not, and a lack of party competition and choice (as a source of a mandate for significant policy change) contributed to the 'degeneration of Italian democracy' (Fabrini and Gilbert, 2000: 28). Similarly, Germany's stable political system was once considered to be an antidote to uncertain economic conditions in the rest of the world and conducive to the 'Golden Age' of post-war economic recovery. However, it now contributes to a, 'painfully slow, incremental process of political and economic change' which is ill equipped to deal with new political problems and unable to command the respect of its citizens (Kitschelt and Streeck, 2003: 2).

The common view seems to be that a majoritarian system puts power in the hands of the few and gives them more opportunity to pursue the comprehensive rationality ideal. However, an 'incrementalist view' suggests that the common theme in these countries is the attachment to unrealistic expectations about how quickly policy can change substantively within *any* political system. This leads to frustration at the lack of policy change and then disenchantment in politics and politicians. Hayes (2001: 3) draws on theories of incrementalism to suggest two constants in most mature political processes:

- 1 The necessity of bargaining and compromise between actors who have different information, different interests and conflicting views.
- 2 The need to build on past policies.

Incrementalist strategies may be used in most political systems for good reason: the identification of widespread bargaining and compromise is a sign of a mature and pluralistic process where the balance of power is not skewed towards some actors at the expense of others.

Radical change may be *worrying* since it suggests the ability of governments to ride roughshod over previous agreements. Therefore, instead of pursuing institutional reforms as a means to reinvigorate public confidence in politics, political elites should educate the public about the limits to (and problems with) radical change (Hayes, 2001: 3).

### **How do modern theories conceptualize bounded rationality? Is incrementalism inevitable?**

The identification of bounded rationality is a fundamental part of most contemporary theories of public policy – but do they confirm Lindblom's argument that incrementalism is the main consequence? Incrementalism is certainly one of many discussions to highlight the limits to radical policy change by comprehensively rational policymakers.

The model of *policy communities* suggests that incrementalism transcends formal political structures. Regular changes of government do not necessarily cause wholesale shifts in policy, even in the 'majoritarian UK'. In part, this is because most policy decisions are effectively beyond the reach of ministers. The sheer size of government necessitates breaking policy down into more manageable issues involving a smaller number of interested and knowledgeable participants. Therefore, most public policy is conducted primarily through specialist policy communities which process 'technical' issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public or Parliament, and with minimal ministerial involvement. These arrangements exist because there is a logic to devolving decisions and consulting with certain affected interests. Ministers rely on their officials for information and advice. For specialist issues, those officials rely on specialist organizations. Organizations trade information, advice and other resources (such as the ability to implement or 'deliver' a large group membership) for access to, and influence within, government. Further, the logic of this relationship holds regardless of the party of government. Therefore, we are unlikely to witness the types of radical policy shift often associated with a change of government (Richardson and Jordan, 1979; Jordan and Richardson, 1982; Jordan, 2005; Jordan and Maloney, 1997; Cairney, 2008).

*Inheritance before choice in public policy* extends the discussion of incrementalism to inertia (see Box 6.4 for a comparison of terms). The effect of decades of cumulative policies is that newly elected policymakers inherit a huge government with massive commitments. Most policy decisions are based on legislation which already exists and the bulk of public expenditure is spent on government activities (such as welfare benefits) that continue by routine (Rose, 1990; 1986; Rose and Davies, 1994). This theme of inertia is reinforced by *policy succession*