

## 16- Dissonance in Policy Processes: A Conclusion

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The motivation behind this «walk-talk» project was to find ways of incorporating policy speeches into political economic conceptualizations and explanations of public policies. Our conviction was that, as social scientists, we had to take policy speech into consideration if only because of its presence everywhere in policy processes. As Giandomenico Majone put it, «public policy is made of language [...] Political parties, the electorate, the legislature, the executive, the courts, the media, interest groups, and independent experts all engage in a continuous process of debate and reciprocal persuasion» (1989: 1). Nourished by this conviction, our intuition was that looking at policy speech, and more precisely at policy dissonance – and, for that matter, at policy consonance – would reveal new issues and hypotheses.

We were happy enough with the outcome of this project to publish this collection of essays. Each contribution presented here addressed a specific issue, most often in a specific country over a specific period of time; and each one, in its own right, yielded specific conclusions which preclude the possibility of a general conclusion. Yet, this fruitful dispersion also yielded a number of theoretical and empirical conclusions that reach beyond single applications. In this conclusion we shall summarise these general conclusions and then we shall discuss some of the issues raised at the end of this project.

### 16.1 Summary of theoretical and empirical conclusions

The theoretical conclusions reached in the chapters of this book are normative and positive.

#### *Normative theoretical conclusions*

The normative conclusions are all related to the quality of democracy. The best summary was given by Thomas De Koninck when he argued that the quality of political life depended on the quality of speech, adding that the quality of speech referred not only to its truth but also to its relevance. Vincent Lemieux argued likewise about political parties: the quality of their speech impacts on their credibility. Politicians would sensibly improve their lot if they made pledges on

processes rather than results, and if they were more transparent and more modest. Emma Galli, Veronica Grembi and Fabio Padovano also argued for more transparency as they suggested that policy consonance, i.e., the congruence between election results, the content of inaugural speeches, and budget decisions, was an indication of political accountability in a democracy. More transparency should lead to more accountability. Louis Imbeau suggested a more moderate view with his concept of benevolent dissonance according to which a decision maker is often more efficient in her efforts to raise revenue, for example, through some sort of fiscal policy dissonance. In sum, as a system of «government by discussion», democracy relies on speech. Caring for the former implies caring for the latter.

### *Positive theoretical conclusions*

The positive theoretical conclusions relate to the mechanism linking policy speech to policy actions and outcomes. The propositions made by Albert Breton and Louis Imbeau nicely complement each other on this issue. For Imbeau, speech is a tool by which decision-makers use their knowledge as a power resource to influence investors and taxpayers, among others, through the mechanism of persuasion. He argues that, to be efficient, persuasion often implies dissonance, that is, some sort of disagreement between speech and action. Thus a decision maker would talk fiscal liberalism while walking fiscal discipline when speaking to taxpayers but the same decision maker would talk fiscal conservatism while walking fiscal indiscipline when speaking to investors. Since her speeches are often public and, therefore, heard by both taxpayers and investors, the decision maker often needs to be dissonant if she wants to reach her double objective of making taxpayers pay their taxes and investors accept a reasonable risk premium on her bonds. Breton unveils the mechanism through which persuasion works. By their speeches, politicians create «clusters of monomaniacs» that they can exploit, as monomaniacs are willing to pay a higher price, i.e., to tolerate a given policy content (say, higher corruption), provided that they get what they value most, their monomania (say, security). This «information shrouding» works under two necessary conditions related to the cost of search for information and to the demand curve of cluster members. Hence, drawing from two disciplinary sources, these authors teach us an important positive lesson about our theme: Speech should not be overlooked by policy analysts as it is central to the interactions among policy actors, be they conceived as power interactions or market interactions.

But there is an important dimension that neither Breton nor Imbeau considered, namely the way policy speeches are received by targeted audiences. Indeed, one can think of three stages in the discursive policy process: speech production, speech transmission, and speech reception. Imbeau

is concerned with the production stage as he asks why and how specific contents are produced by policy makers. Breton is interested in the transmission stage as he looks at how speech contents are transmitted from policy makers to voters. The third stage about the reception of speech contents is completely ignored. Yet, no overall understanding of the walk-talk relationship is possible without taking into account how speeches are received and ideas adopted.

In the context of manipulation and delusion, looking at the reception stage raises the issue of how a rational actor actually adopts doubtful ideas<sup>1</sup>. The literature on fiscal policy, for example, proposes several mechanisms that could be transposed to the reception stage of the discursive policy process. Among them, one may cite fiscal illusion, a mechanism by which voters misestimate the costs and the benefits of public spending and consequently support policies that they would not otherwise support. Rejecting the theory that ordinary thinking follows invalid rules, defended by many modern cognitive psychologists, the French sociologist Raymond Boudon sees three models explaining why ideas (true, doubtful, or plain false) settle in people's mind. «Not only because of the intervention of the passions and interests, as Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Pareto, and many others have insisted on, not only because we can be experts only on a limited number of questions, as Tocqueville stressed, but because we endorse our opinions in accordance with a 'satisfying' strategy. We tend to believe that 'X is true' as soon as we have found a system of reasons – each of which is acceptable – leading to the conclusion that 'X is true'» (Boudon 1999: 159). Illustrating his 'satisfying' theory with several «local ideologies» like the belief that taxes are deflationary or that they are inflationary, or the belief that globalization is a main cause of unemployment, Boudon concludes that «false collective ideas [...] are a normal phenomenon not a pathological one» (*ibid.*) and that they are eventually eroded not by criticism (competing ideas) but by the negative consequences they generate.

These considerations about the discursive process lead us to conclude that the construction of positive theories and hypotheses about the walk-talk relationship needs to be developed at each stage of the discursive process – production, transmission, and reception. Indeed, several decades of public policy research have taught us that theories and hypotheses may greatly differ from one stage of the policy process to another. The same may be true for the discursive process.

### *Empirical conclusions*

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<sup>1</sup> See the inspiring book by the French sociologist Raymond Boudon: *The Art of Self-Persuasion*..

At the empirical level, the chapters of this book presented quite interesting empirical results some of which show a remarkable regularity. One such regularity is that politicians express a noted concern for fiscal and economic issues in their speeches. This is true of American presidents about whom Francesc Pujol found that they consistently expressed an attachment to fiscal discipline, stronger before 1930 and after 1990. This is also true of French prime ministers about whom Martial Foucault and Abel François found that they speak consistently more often about the economy and finance than about any other policy issues with the exception of Messmer (right-wing, 1972-74) and Cresson (left-wing, 1991-92). Louis Imbeau found the same regularity among provincial premiers in Canada who, on average, expressed more fiscal conservatism, i.e., they spoke more like their ministers of Finance than their ministers of Health or Education between 1971 and 2002. Étienne Charbonneau reached a similar conclusion about public servants in US state lottery: their annual reports mostly lean towards fiscal, as opposed to social, concerns.

Another regularity bears on the dissonance one finds in fiscal policy. The preferences expressed in inaugural addresses where governments expose their legislative plans do not correspond to budgetary measures or to fiscal outcomes. This is what Emma Galli, Veronica Grembi and Fabio Padovano found in the Italian regions where no significant relationship exists between the left-right content of inaugural speeches and long term regional budgets. Martial Foucault and Abel François show that, in France, there is no significant relationship between the priorities expressed in inaugural speeches and spending, except in the realm of agriculture and transport. The same thing happens in Canadian provinces where Louis Imbeau documented that fiscally conservative premiers actually deteriorated their budget balance more often than the fiscally liberal ones.

Ideological coherence is another regularity that one can observe in several chapters of this book. Emma Galli and her colleagues show that the left-right content of the inaugural addresses by regional governments in Italy is significantly related to the left-right distribution of the votes in the preceding election. Jean Crête and Nouhoun Diallo show that a similar ideological coherence exists between a party's electoral platform and its inaugural speech once in power. Other findings related to ideology are those reported by Jérôme Couture and Louis Imbeau who show that revenues are systematically underestimated in budget speeches when a conservative party is in power. Likewise, Jean-François Godbout and Bei Yu found that American liberal senators speak more than their conservative colleagues.

These regularities in empirical results may be viewed as a validity test of the methods used in analysing speeches. Indeed, among the empirical chapters, we find quite a wide spectrum of

speech analysis methods<sup>2</sup> : 1- quasi-fully-automated technique (Godbout & Yu); 2- semi-automated technique (Charbonneau, Galli et al., Imbeau); 3- dictionary technique (Foucault & François); 4- classical content analysis (Crête & Diallo, Pujol, Suerdem); 5- interpretative analysis (Josselin & Marciano). This classification may be conceived as an ordinal scale measuring the level of subjective decisions made by the analyst: there is potentially more subjectivity in interpretative analysis than in a quasi-fully-automated analysis. None of the authors tried to compare and evaluate various speech analysis techniques but taken together, these chapters show a level of empirical regularities among techniques. The fiscal and economic concern regularity was uncovered through a classical content analysis (Pujol), a dictionary technique (Foucault & François) and a semi-automated technique, the «wordscores» technique (Imbeau, Charbonneau); the regularity on fiscal policy dissonance was documented using a dictionary technique (Foucault & François) and a semi-automated technique (Galli et al., Imbeau); the regularity in ideological coherence is the result of the application of a quasi-fully-automated technique (Godbout & Yu), a semi-automated technique (Galli et al.), and a classical content analysis (Crête & Diallo, Couture & Imbeau). These are tests of what Klaus Krippendorff called «predictive validity», that is, «the degree to which anticipated observations occur in due time» (Krippendorff 2004: 319).

## **16.2 Three models of policy speech and action**

The normative chapters in the volume focus on the “walk the talk” theme. They ask whether policy actors should do what they say, and under what conditions not doing what they say is legitimate. The empirical studies in the volume focus on the slightly different question of “dissonance” (or consonance) between policy speech and action. As a result of the differences in scope between the “dissonance” and the “walk the talk” themes, the normative discussion in the volume appears self-contained; sometimes offering little help in guiding the empirical discussion. Conversely, some empirical chapters in the volume do not speak to the normative chapters. In order to try to bridge the gap between the empirical and the normative chapters in the volume, we will resist asking one more time what the relationship between speech and action should or should not be, and ask instead how to square our thinking about “walk the talk” and “dissonance” with the message we get from the empirical studies in the volume. The conclusion that emerges from this review is that empirical studies of consonance must not only investigate

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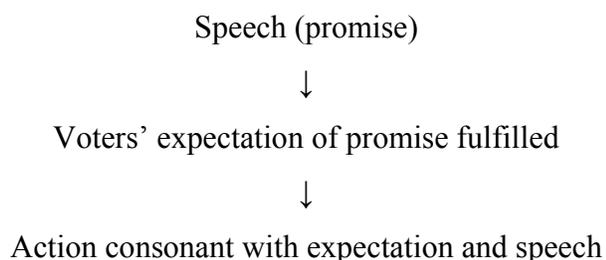
<sup>2</sup> Here we use the typology proposed by Jean Crête and Nouhoun Diallo in their chapter, to which we add a fifth type.

whether politicians do what they say; they must also consider whether what politicians say and do is consonant with what the public wants.

Our discussion of how we should think about dissonance and consonance processes is inspired by Jane Mansbridge's (2003) typology of representation. Three forms of representation in Mansbridge's typology are relevant to our discussion.<sup>3</sup> In "promissory" representation, an elected representative acts in accordance with what he has promised in the last election. In "gyroscopic" (or self-propelled) representation, a representative acts in accordance with his own principles and values. Therefore, he is not accountable to his constituents in a strict sense. In "anticipatory" representation, a representative, recognizing that public opinion may change before the next election, tries to anticipate what will resonate with the voters at the next election.

Although the concepts of walk the talk and dissonance between speech and action differ from the concept of representation, they are clearly related by the fact that they both involve some expectations from voters. In one case, voters expect that their representative will work on their behalf in the legislature. In the other case, voters expect that a representative's speech will be consonant with his action. Policy speech and action do occur in both representative and non representative states, but the question of the dissonance between speech and action is more explicit in representative states because only the citizens of representative states regularly do something about dissonance, hence our focus on electoral mechanisms in presenting our three models.

Mansbridge's promissory representation model finds a straightforward application in the promissory model of policy speech and action. In this model, a representative undertakes an action in response to what voters expect of him based on his prior promise (speech). The promissory model is depicted below:



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<sup>3</sup> Mansbridge proposes a fourth type of representation by a representative with whom voters have no electoral relationship. She calls it "surrogate" representation. Surrogate representation has no obvious translation in a model of the relationship between policy speech and action.

One desirable property of the promissory model — from the perspective of empirical research — is that it follows a well defined sequence of causally related stages that can be easily operationalized. Voters have clear expectations that they signal to the representative through their vote. A representative can choose what he promises to his constituents. But once in the legislature, his hands are tied. He is entirely accountable to his constituents.

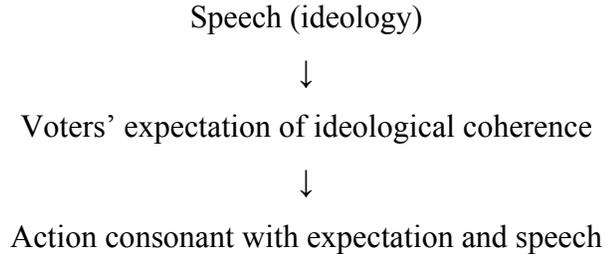
Clear voter expectations give the promissory model its strong accountability flavour. Accountability is what most authors have in mind in the normative chapters of the volume, including Pétry and Collette's review of the literature about campaign pledge fulfillment. The concept of accountability is less present in the empirical chapters, although we encounter it in the chapters assessing whether budgetary choices fulfill the promises of inaugural speeches by Foucault and Abel in France, and by Galli and her collaborators in Italy.

The promissory model also assumes that voters' expectations are detailed and specific (based on a representative's promises that are themselves detailed and specific). But this is too demanding. Voters in the real world know very little about the details of a representative's campaign promises. At best they use cognitive shortcuts to estimate the ideological location of the representatives. In the real world of elections, voters evaluate a representative's speech based on its general tone (more precisely on its coverage by the media), and on its coherence with previous speeches by the representative or by leaders of his party, not on the specific promises it contains. In a context of generally low voter information, a representative's speech is meaningful to voters by virtue of what it says about the representative who makes it (or about the representative's party), not by virtue of the specific promises it contains. These problems are addressed in part in the "gyroscopic" model of policy speech and action.

In the gyroscopic model, policy speeches create voters' expectations that a representative (or his party) will act in a way that is broadly in line with his ideology or his values. The model no longer assumes that voters expect a representative to keep his promises. The representative acts as a self-propelled entity who can freely choose what to do in the legislature based not on the promise he made to his voters but on his own (or his party's) principles and values.

Whereas in the promissory model, the desirability of consonance between speech and action ensues from voters' expectation that the representative will keep his word, in the self-propelled or gyroscopic model, the desirability of consonance follows from the expectation created by electoral replacement. Having selected and placed in the legislature a representative whose

ideology they approve, voters expect ideological coherence. The gyroscopic model can be depicted as follows:



The promissory consonance model works best in political systems in which voters can watch over their representatives and hold them accountable for their actions. The systems best suited for this are those with single-district elections and legislatures that give lots of power and influence to their individual members. The promissory model is probably a valid description of the relationship between representatives' speech and action in the US. It is less valid in states with mixed or proportional representation elections and/or parliamentary systems with party discipline. In such states promissory consonance makes less sense because voters cannot hold representatives accountable through sanction, and representatives are forced to act according to the party line, not according to the wishes of their constituents.

The gyroscopic model applies not only to representatives acting on behalf of their constituents but also to political organizations acting on behalf of entire political systems, something that the promissory model does not do. Many empirical chapters in the volume are about speeches and actions by national political organizations (parties, ministers, and governments) not local representatives. These chapters correctly focus on consonance (or coherence) between speech and action rather than on accountability between a representative and his constituents.

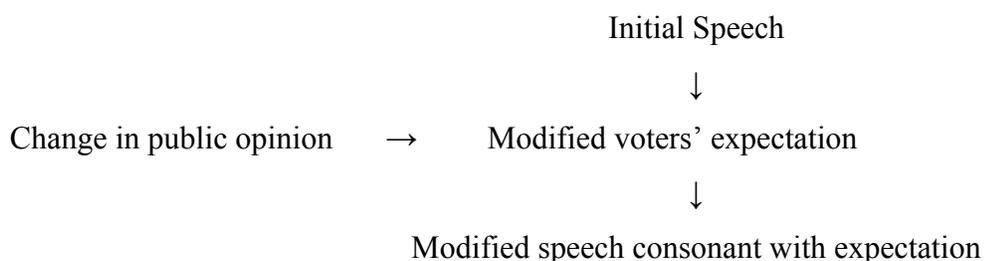
The gyroscopic model does not contradict the promissory model as long as a representative's promises are consistent with his own (or his party's) ideology and values. A further avenue of research would consist in studying cases in which electoral promises by a representative (or by a party leader) are at variance with his (or his party's) principles and values and possibly correlating these occurrences with subsequent policy action (or inaction). This type of research would most certainly emphasize public deliberation, a process in which all points of view are considered and all participants enjoy equal respect (Habermas 1984). To make sure that his promises and subsequent actions coincide with his party's values, a representative needs to consult his constituents and deliberate with them at election time. This quote initially intended by Mansbridge (2003, 522) for her gyroscopic model of representation applies just as well to the gyroscopic model of consonance between speech and action:

Good deliberation at [election time] would result in voters achieving both developed understandings of their own interests and accurate predictions of their chosen representative's future behaviors. Good deliberation requires that representatives not intentionally deceive the public as to their future behaviour. The voter's aim is to discern and select on the criterion of commonality of interests between the representative and the constituent.

As an illustration of Mansbridge's point, Montpetit (2006) persuasively claims that Jean Charest's 2003 campaign promises to make deep tax cuts and to re-engineer the state lacked legitimacy (and popular support) because they did not coincide with the long held values of the Quebec Liberal Party and also because Jean Charest failed to consult and deliberate about them with the citizens of the province before trying to implement them. This would explain in part the subsequent failure of the Liberal government to act on these promises.

Another problem with the promissory model (and with the gyroscopic model) is that voter expectations are rarely stable. Issues and public opinion change over time. When issues evolve and public opinion changes from one election to the next, keeping past campaign promises (or being faithful to a fixed set of principles and values) does not appear a very rational behaviour for a representative. It is more rational for him to please future voters by zeroing in on where public opinion will be at the next election, not where it was at the last election.

The problem of changing voter expectations can be solved in part by considering a third model of the relationship between speech and action. We call it the "anticipatory" model to paraphrase Mansbridge anticipatory model of representation. In the anticipatory model, a representative anticipates that the preference of voters will change before the next election, and translates this anticipation into modified speech and modified action. Then, two types of dissonance may occur, one between the initial speech and the modified action, the other between the modified speech and the modified action. The anticipatory consonance model is depicted as follows:





### Action based on modified expectation

If public opinion does not change between elections, then the anticipatory and promissory behaviours of the representative will be indistinguishable. The interesting research question here is: what happens when public opinion does change? If public opinion does change, a representative may be caught in a contradiction between his desire to fulfill previous commitments (as the promissory model prescribes) and the necessity to modify his discourse and action to adapt to changing voters' expectations (as the anticipatory model prescribes).

One way of solving the contradiction is for a representative to try and make his initial speech coincide with changing voters' expectations by correctly anticipating the type of modified discourse and action that will best resonate with changing public opinion. To succeed in this endeavour, a representative must use public deliberation, just like the representative in the gyroscopic model. A politician who fails to allow deliberation to take place may underestimate where public opinion is going, as for example George W. Bush underestimated the change in American public opinion from support to opposition to the War in Iraq (Voeten 2006). A representative who allows deliberation to take place in the public space will be better able to estimate where public opinion is going and how to adapt his action to the future state of public opinion.

Public deliberation not only helps a representative better to adapt his action to changing public opinion, it also helps him in his effort to mobilize public opinion behind his preferred policies. In this sense, the failure of George W. Bush to deliberate with the American public about the war in Iraq was as much a failure to adapt to changing public opinion and a failure to identify the language and political communication techniques that would have ensured public opinion mobilization behind his chosen policy direction. As Stimson (1991, 9) has stated colourfully "the politician who would influence the current of public opinion must swim in it."

### 16.3 Concluding remark: Is dissonance pathological?

In concluding this work, we feel like lingering over the normative orientation which seems to have guided the contributors to this volume. In seeking to answer the question, « Do they walk like they talk? », they adopted the same normative position, postulating that a suitable behaviour for policymakers is to align their actions with their words, thus agreeing with an opinion largely shared by a majority of citizens who believe that decision-makers should be truth tellers.

Therefore, one of the lessons learned in this work is that the actions of policymakers would be favourably viewed by researchers – and more broadly by citizens – if their actions were in harmony with their words and if their intentions were known by all.

Two values are foundational to this point of view: honesty and transparency. These two values have taken an increasingly important place in the operation of most public organizations in the last twenty years. They are so well anchored in the collective imagination that it is no longer necessary to defend their necessity in a context of public cynicism and mistrust towards government. According to this point of view, there is no place in a democracy for treason nor deception (Bok, 1989), and it seems inconceivable to “concede that officials have, on occasion, the right to deceive” (Pasquarella and Killilea, 2005 : 261). But if we limit ourselves to studying the speeches of policymakers so as only to identify conformity with their actions, we run the risk of developing an incomplete vision of the contemporary political reality at the heart of which untruthfulness and opacity both find their justification. As a matter of fact, it is helpful to remember that neither transparency nor opacity can ever be complete<sup>4</sup>. Countries that have adopted legislations in matters of access to governmental information have all defined exceptions concerning national security, public order, and respect for privacy, among others.

There are two important categories of justifications for untruthfulness in politics: the first is founded on the pursuing of individual interests and is by nature strategic, while the second is anchored in the pursuit of the general interest and is designed to be used in exceptional situations. It is therefore possible to envision moments when a policymaker’s lying would be appropriate so as to preserve either personal interests or the general interest.

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<sup>4</sup> Breton and his colleagues observed : «If we postulate the existence of a metric ( $t$ ), varying between zero and one, along which we could measure the degree of transparency,  $t$  would never be equal to zero or to one. For example, if we define transparency as the availability of all data and information on a particular matter, the consequent information overload that will generally result means that it is possible to have full transparency on the supply side of the equation as it were and less, possibly much less, than full transparency on the demand side of the same equation (Breton et al, 2007: 4).

Since, as mentioned in the introduction to this volume, speech is a policy tool, it is rational that each actor uses the most efficient instruments available to achieve the desired outcome. Therefore, in a political system where many actors have the habit of lying, lies may become an important instrument to bring about equilibrium between actors. Untruthfulness is so widely spread that the person who believes that only honesty guides the actions of others quickly gets labelled an idealist (positive spin) or a gullible fool (negative spin). Since childhood, we have known that there are “white lies”, lies that do no harm. Why should it be any different in politics? The policymaker who will not lie puts herself in a position of weakness with respect to her opponents. Professional sports offer us good examples of “normalized deviant” behaviours as an athlete may feel compelled to use drugs in order to win in a competition. At this point, it is all a question of dosage not to get caught. The athlete needs to take drugs but not. The policymaker needs to use deception if she wants to win the support of voters, but not to the point where she would lose her credibility. This is an application of Machiavellian principle stating that the Prince should lie if the truth would make him lose power or cause him any disadvantage. Former French President Jacques Chirac modernized this principle when declaring that “promises only engage those who believe in them.”

Moreover, in certain cases, the truth can generate more negative consequences than those ensuing from a lie. In this case, untruthfulness can be justified to preserve the general interest, which is one of the objectives pursued by the majority of policymakers. Many authors developed a utilitarian concept of lie (Cliffe, Ramsay and Bartlett 2000; Pasquarella and Killilea, 2005). According to them, lying is a precious tool used to protect the general interest as it offers policymakers more room to manoeuvre. Sissela Bok emphasizes this idea arguing that certain lies are justifiable in times of crisis because they may be defended and justified when the situation is back to normal (1989: 178). On this topic, Maureen Ramsay proposed a “just lie” theory according to which resorting to lying can be accepted and sometimes even required if: 1) it serves a just cause (e.g. national security, avoiding economic ruin, etc.); 2) the dangers it prevents are, for the most part, greater than those its use would entail; 3) no other alternative is foreseen to resolve the problem; and 4) the objective for which the lie is used has a reasonable probability of being reached. Under these conditions, lying, or the withholding of information, may provide better results than honesty and transparency. Even more so, a completely transparent policymaker would run the risk of generating indescribable chaos. Untruthfulness is sometimes justified.

These considerations suggest that, to be complete, an analysis of dissonance in policy processes must be open to evaluating cases where it is legitimate for policymakers not to walk like they talk.

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