On the Process of Making Decisions

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No one who wishes to keep up with the contributions of the social sciences can afford not to read **The Intelligence of Democracy: Decision Making Through Adjustment** (Free Press, New York, 1965. 360 pp., $7.50), by Charles E. Lindblom. It presents a powerful critique of the most widely held conception of how decisions—of man and government, corporations and societies—are made and ought to be made; it spells out an alternative approach; and it explores the relationship between decision and policy making and two central values of social-political life: democracy and equality. The author, a professor of economics at Yale and a former head of the U.S. AID Mission to India, is a highly qualified authority on the subjects that he explores. My disagreement with his central finding and recommendation does not diminish my feeling that one should read the book.

The most widely held conception about how decisions are and ought to be made is the rationalistic one. Man has a problem, he sets himself a goal, and he collects information about the various courses of action that seem to be open and about the consequences of going down each alternative path. He then calculates the total effects of each alternative and chooses the optimal one. As this alternative is implemented, the problem is resolved.

Lindblom argues that this model is not, cannot, and should not be followed. The model imposes strictures that cannot be "lived with." Man cannot neatly separate goals from means, or values from facts; he cannot gain—in the realistic limits of time and cost—the needed information to judge rationally among alternatives. The world is an "open" system in which there is no end to the consequences, and a man cannot compute the total effects of an act because he is committed to several values which are not ordered or ranked in a way that makes computation possible. (Here even computers will not help. How many ounces of freedom are we willing to sacrifice for a one-ounce increase in equality?) All said, we are fumbling in the dark, not driving in broad daylight.

In addition to being impossible to accomplish, attempts to live up to the model have undesirable effects; the decision maker becomes frustrated and paralyzed because, try as he may, he cannot adhere to the model. Time and again throughout the book, when Lindblom advances his own approach and senses that the reader might not like the taste of it, he falls back on this central point: the rationalistic alternative is neither feasible nor desirable. Many who have studied or attempted the rational planning of anything more complicated than traffic lights will agree.

What do decision makers actually do? Lindblom does not study all decision makers, only democratic "stable" ones, and not all decisions made, only the common ones. The strategy actually followed he calls "disjointed incrementalism." Decision makers do not pursue goals but move away from a problem by following a policy that is marginally different from the existing one; if it works they continue to "increment"; if it does not work they try something different. There are as a rule no solutions to problems but continued attacks on them which have an accumulative effect. Instead of examining all the alternatives, the decision maker explores a few, mainly those with which he is familiar. Lindblom refers to his position as the "science of muddling through." Others similarly characterized the Anglo-Saxon approach to problems and called it "pragmatic." Lindblom in this book goes beyond these earlier statements (including some of his own) by presenting a detailed, technical, and jargon-laced analysis of "incrementalism," for which the reader must turn to the book itself. [Lindblom's article, "Science of muddling through," was published in *Public Administration Review* (1959); he had elaborated his approach in two earlier books, one with Robert A. Dahl, *Politics, Economics, and Welfare* (Harper, 1953), now available in Harper paperbacks, and in *A Strategy of Decision* with David Braybrooke (Free Press, 1963).]

There is one essential feature of incrementalism, however, that needs to be explored here: Whose values are served by such decision making and how can we tell a poor from a good decision? Lindblom's answer is based on the observation that in any social situation there is a large variety of "partisans." When one moves ahead without taking into account the others' values, they "scream," exert pressure, and the policy is adapted to take them into account. (The sophisticated decision maker anticipates this process to a degree.) Lindblom concludes that *good decisions are those based on consensus.*

Lindblom recognizes that this "intelligence of democracy" in effect means that the decisions are more responsive to those who have more power. He shows how several factors "soften" the picture; for example, some of the partisans, especially public authorities, have legitimate power to make societal decisions—others, especially vested interests, tend not to. Those who have legitimate power have an advantage over those who do not, and thus consensus—though responsive to power—is less "interest" bound than might at first seem. But Lindblom argues primarily that any basis for decision making other than consensus is either not feasible or less desirable. His position comes into focus in his discussion of pluralism and equality, which clearly indicates his preferences for the former. Consensus is needed because there are many power holders; inequality exists because they do not have the same degree of power. He who seeks to advance equality would have to impose the policies that this value entails on some of the partisans, namely the advantaged ones. This, Lindblom says, using some very long sentences, is not the "intelligence of democracy." He thus not only suggests that the decision makers are incrementalists, he also urges them to be so. As Kenneth Boulding puts it, rather than making the decision makers guilty about not being rational, as previous authorities on the subject have tended to do, Lindblom makes the authorities guilty for not having recognized that decision makers have been following the best strategy all along. An Israeli professor of public administration, Y. Dror, points out that Lindblom tends to give comfort to the forces of inertia and con-

The reviewer, a professor at Yale University, was formerly economic adviser to the U.S. AID Mission to India.

servatism (*Public Administration Review*, Sept., 1964). Lindblom answered that the alternative model of rationalism leads to inaction and confusion.

In my judgment, Lindblom's central mistake is to imply that the world is limited to a choice between rationalism and disjointed incrementalism. Actually, incrementalism—as a strategy—is an over-reaction to the limitations of rationalism; empirical reality and political ethicality lie somewhere between these two. Lindblom is correct: rationalism is not a valid descriptive or prescriptive model. He deserves a front seat in the academy for having shown that alone. But it does not follow that effective decision makers do or should follow an incrementalist strategy.

What really happens can well be illustrated from a study that purports to support Lindblom's thesis with hard statistical evidence (Lindblom himself deals in qualitative evidence). Richard F. Fenno, Jr., showed that for 12 years, for 37 federal agencies, in the majority of the cases the budget of one year was an increment of that of the previous year. [Fenno's unpublished study is quoted by Aaron B. Wildavsky in *The Politics of the Budgetary Process* (Little, Brown, 1964).] That is, despite all the congressional hearings, presidential directives, public demands, international developments, and technological breakthroughs, the best predictor of an agency's appropriation for one year was what it had gained the year before. Several authorities have cited this evidence to show that the federal government is one big incremental decision maker. In fact, the evidence is somewhat more complicated: in 233 out of 444 budget-agency years, the change from one year to the next was ten percent or lower, but there was a similar number of "years" (211, to be accurate) in which the change was ten percent or larger—actually, in 67 budget-years it was 31 percent or more, a very nonincremental increment.

More importantly, it is a mistake to view each annual decision as an independent event. For instance, when Congress created NASA (1958) or subscribed to the goal of putting an American on the moon and of returning him safely (1961), it in effect committed itself to a whole set of increments over the next decade. True, Congress reserved the right of annual review and left room for "remedial" steps, but most Congressmen realized that they were making a 10-year, 20-billion-dollar-plus commitment, not a decision for 1 year and a few billion. Similarly, the defense budget was "incremented" to the level of 9.5 percent of the gross national product between 1955 and 1960, after the Korean war, but it was almost doubled during the Korean war itself; it was only 5.0 percent in 1950. In short, incrementalism often is the elaboration and spelling out of *fundamental* decisions made at critical turning points.

Moreover, if we compare decision makers who are more successful, in terms of achieving their goals, with those who are less successful, it seems that the former follow several "rules" that are not in line with Lindblom's noninnovative, short range, consensus strategy. Chess playing might illustrate these rules. The more effective players explore several alternative strategies sporadically, looking *several* steps ahead for a "crisis" that might lie ahead in their anticipated course, and search for *better* strategies even if they do not see anything wrong with the one that they follow. No player ever follows a rational model of examining all possible strategies, nor do players who explore many strategies necessarily do better than those who explore fewer, although it appears that some degree of strategic scanning is better than mere incrementalism. Scanning proceeds not by studying those alternatives explored in full detail, but by checking them against a list of what we call "obviously crippling disadvantages." Those that pass such checking are explored more in detail for defects until all but one are eliminated. This is pursued for a while, until strategic scanning is reopened.

The whole process is somewhat like the work of those satellites in which there are two cameras, a broad angle and undetailed camera, and a narrow angle and detailed one; the sky is first scanned by the broad angle camera, and when spots of trouble appear, the second camera is turned on such spots. (Incrementalism would turn its lenses only on spots where recent hurricanes had gathered.) Mixed scanning is far from perfect; for instance, a strategy rejected because of an "obviously crippling disadvantage" might, if followed despite cost or risk, have been the optimal one. But as examining all strategies in full detail at each step—that is, the rationalistic approach—is not feasible, mixed scanning seems to provide a more effective strategy than does incrementalism.

As to whose values are to be pursued, the consensus model does not take into account the creative role of political leadership. Mere response to "incoming" pressures of all the "partisans" of a system will lead to a myopic policy; somebody must speak up for the longer run. Mere response to the pluralism of power will tend to neglect the underprivileged and community needs; somebody has to represent these. The real intelligence of democracy is to provide for one center of power that derives its special interests (for example, reelection) from being less partisan and more national, less myopic and more depth prodding, less "political" and more normative than other participants in the political process. These, for instance, are the qualities of great presidents. Such leaders are especially needed because the various groups participating in societal decision making do not come to it with a firm set of interests and viewpoints which Lindblom, who comes to political analysis from economics, tends to assume; this set itself is molded in part under the guidance of national leadership.

Lindblom stresses, in much more detail and finesse than can be recorded here, that "mutual accommodation of partisans" accounts for much more and better decision making than often is assumed; he opposes it to "central coordinated decision making" which, he correctly states, has many deficiencies. He also is aware that practically all decision making processes are "mixes" of these two types, although he is too busy contrasting the two to fully explore the more common "mixes." Above all, he underestimates the relative weight and the merits of strategic and national factors in societal decision making. Nevertheless, he has done more than any social scientist to focus the debate on how we do make decisions and on how we ought to make them.

Arid Zone Research

Methodology of Plant Eco-Physiology: Proceedings of the Montpellier Symposium (UNESCO, Paris, 1965. 555 pp., $20), edited by F. E. Eckardt, is the 25th volume in the UNESCO series on Arid Zone Research; it is similar in size, format, and appearance to those that have preceded it. The volume includes most of the papers presented at an international symposium held in April 1962. Forty-six of the 57 papers are in English, with summaries in French; the remaining papers, plus an intro-