Panel 9: Facing Blame, Avoiding Credit

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Politicians will often try to avoid taking credit for policy decisions they made. After all, if they take credit they will be the first to receive blame when something goes wrong (Hood, 2002; Weaver, 1986). Still, even if they try to avoid credit politicians (or even a whole policy sector) can be blamed if things go wrong. A single incident or a series of unfortunate events can result in citizens and Members of Parliament (MPs) critically assessing the functioning of a politician or policy sector (Brändstrom and Kuipers, 2003; Alink, Boin and 't Hart, 2001; Suchman, 1995). If this critical scrutiny continues for long enough, the legitimacy of the politician or even policy sector declines. It is therefore imperative that actors who are being blamed (whether they are individual politicians or part of an institution such as a policy sector) are successful in restoring their image. After all, inability to restore the image will result in permanent legitimacy loss (Suchman, 1995).

So how do actors try to avoid blame and how do they deal with blame once they can no longer avoid it? One way to deal with the backlash is taking action. Either by installing an inquiry (thereby showing the public that something is being done (Resodihardjo, 2006; McConnell, 2003)) or by taking decisions and change policy (though reform suggestions might be nothing more than symbolic politics ('t Hart, 1993)). Another option is to open up communication and try to convince the audience that either nothing is wrong or that the blame is undeserved. Blame avoidance and blame shifting tactics can be quite helpful in this regard (Coombs, 1998; Benoit, 1997; McGraw, 1991;McGraw, 1990). But are these actions successful? Are actors able to diffuse the threat to their legitimacy?

Currently, mainly communication specialists, psychologist, and business experts write about blame management (an exception being Boin, 't Hart and McConnell, 2008; Bovens,'t Hart, Dekker and Verheuvel, 1999; and Hood c.s., forthcoming). The aim of this conference panel is to bring together academics working on issues related to blame management and accountability/legitimacy in order to get an idea of the current status of research on this topic and to enable academics to broaden their network.

In order to achieve this aim, we invited academics to send paper proposals on topics related to blame management such as blame games, blame avoidance, how (non-governmental) actors deal with accountability pressure, dealing with credit taking and avoidance, and government legitimacy under pressure. Any other paper proposals linked to the themes of blame management, credit avoidance, and accountability/legitimacy were more than welcome.

The theme of this panel is linked to the NIG research program, in particular to the themes of 'Citizens and Governance' and 'The Future of The Nation State' (because of the importance of government institutions to be perceived as legitimate by its stakeholders).

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