TRAUMATIC RENEWAL OF VALUES AND VALUE CRITERIA IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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Documentos de Trabajo
POLÍTICA Y GESTIÓN

DOCUMENTOS DE TRABAJO "POLÍTICA Y GESTIÓN"

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Documento de Trabajo nº 4/2005

TRAUMATIC RENEWAL OF VALUES AND VALUE CRITERIA IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT[*]

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SUMMARY: This work tries to be an empirical sample in the study of learning in public policies, that is, how learning is linked to policy change. Particularly, we have studied political-administrative elites' learning process on crisis provoked by oil spill off the coast of Spain.

After expounded our premises about policy learning and the working hypothesis that have guided our work, we explain the methodology we have employed: the Nominal Group Technique, its advantages in this kind of research and how we used it.

Finally, we display the reflection generated from the empirical work to better understand policy learning process. In this sense, political factors have been revealed as absolutely essential in order to explain what political-administrative elites learn and whatever they decide to implement. Aspects that make crises different from each other (these being technical aspects) show up as less important than political ones. Political aspects make crisis

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similar, because of political reasons behind the decision, communication, and attention strategies.

Two concepts have appeared as the connection of crisis and elites' learning: sensitization and political profitability. The former means the process of becoming fully aware of the problem, being concerned about it, and predisposed towards a faster and more coherent action. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine a government undertaking polices that involve political costs, or anything proved to be unprofitable. This is especially true of learning and implementation of whatever has been learnt from crisis that happened in distant points of time.

Key words: Crisis management, political learning, value criteria, oil spill, Nominal Group Technique, disaster.

Damus huius neglegentiae poenas tamquam
novis territi,cum illa non sint nova sed insolita.

We pay the penalty for this negligence in being terrified
by things as new when they are not new but merely unusual.
Seneca.

This work tries to be an empirical sample in the study of learning in public policies, that is, how learning is linked to policy change. As Bennett and Howlett said "the concept has been overtheorized and underapplied"[1]. Particularly, we focus on political-administrative elites' learning process and, more specifically, on crises provoked by oil tankers off the coast of Spain. The main questions are whether or not there is any relationship between learning processes and beliefs systems, and whether or not that learning is a process strongly marked by political considerations.

We have not been able to answer the first question in a satisfactory way, mainly because the analysed actors are hardly conscious of their own values and not conscious at all about their value criteria. In contrast, in answering the latter, we have discovered the explicative strength and the way of working of political variables.

Firstly, we will start with our theoretical premises about who what, where when and how political-administrative elites learn, followed by our hypothesis and the explanation of the methodology employed, finishing with conclusions.

Premises

We adopt Heclo's definition of learning, who considers that "learning can be taken to mean a relatively enduring alteration in

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[1] C. J. BENNET & M. HOWLETT (1992): "The lessons of learning: Reconciling theories of policy learning and policy change" in *Policy Sciences* 25, 275-294, p. 288.

behaviour that results from experience"[2], understanding experience in a wide sense. Therefore, it would include both direct based experience learning, and learning grounded in reflection about one's own or others' experience.[3]

We disagree with the idea that "It may be impossible to observe the learning activity in isolation from the change requiring explanation. We may only know that learning is taking place because policy change is taking place"[4]. We consider, according to the previous definition of learning, that learning itself is different from its implementation; in fact, to analyse what obstacles impede the use of what has been learnt arises as an interesting field for further research.

We do not discuss whether the individuals learn or what the organizations' learning capability is. Instead we focus on the research of political-administrative elites' learning in crisis, since we are especially interested in the political aspects of policy learning as it concerns this subject.[5] Because of the position of power these elites already mantain, the influence of political factors on the capability to implement whatever has been learnt, is refered to other different questions than that one.

When talking about the object of learning, that is, whatever is learnt, there are four different dimensions:

a) The improvement of technical skills.
b) The understanding of the underlying causal theory of the events[6] and the understanding of the state of the problem's variables.[7]

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[2] H. HECLO (1974): *Modern social Politics in Britain and Sweden*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 306.
[3] E. STERN (1997): "Crisis and Learning: A Conceptual Balance Sheet", en *Journal of contingencies and crisis management*, 5, 2, 69-86.
[4] C. J. BENNET & M. HOWLETT (1992): *Op.Cit.* p. 290. Although we understand than sometimes this assumption is useful as Birkland explicitly does in his study of aviation safety [T. A. BIRKLAND (2004): "Learning and Policy Improvement After Disaster", in *American Behavioural Scientist*, 48, 3, 341-364, p. 344]
[5] Although, finally, dealing with learning in organizations was inevitable. .
[6] P. J. MAY (1992): "Policy Learning and Failure", in *Journal of Public Policy* 12, 4, 331-354, p. 337.
[7] P. A. SABATIER (1987): "Knowledge, Policy-Oriented Learning, and Policy Change", in *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization*, 8, 4, 649-692, p. 672.

c) Political learning in the sense of Sabatier's seeking to advocate one's own beliefsystem and also in the sense of improving the political skills of managing a crisis.

d) Moral learning[8], or learning of values or policy goals.

Among these issues we concentrate our research on political learning, on political and administrative elites' values, because of the deep relationship that can be supposed to exist between them. Although we accept that it is very difficult to change deeply rooted values, as most of scholars say[9], we think it is possible that crisis provokes at the very least a traumatic renewal of value criteria.

Following learning general literature[10] we adopt as a premise that in crises there is a special kind of learning (tacit learning *versus* articulated learning), which is only acquired through the experience itself; it is spread and difficult to teach, because it is hard to transform it into articulate speech. That is why one reacts following the lessons internalised by his own experience when a crisis arises. Since it is highly improbable the actor to live through a similar crisis again, it is very difficult to apply whatever has been learnt.[11]

On the other hand, there are more possibilities for learning when the degree of interest and attention is enhanced by a crisis situation. This is what we are going to call *sensitisation*.

In conclusion, our special interest in studying relationships between political aspects and learning in crisis is specified by the concentration of our attention on the political-administrative elites

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[8] E. STERN (1997): *Op. Cit.*, p. 70.

[9] A relevant exception may be the shifts of policy paradigms thought by P. Hall. Even Sabatier actually recognizes that changes in the deep normative core of the beliefs systems are possible, although they would be very difficult, akin to a religious conversion.

[10] G. RYLE (1949): *The Concept of Mind.* London: Hutchinson's University Library; M. POLANYI (1959): *The Study of Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; M. OAKESHOTT (1962): *Rationalism in Politics*. London: Methuen; M. OAKESHOTT (1975): *On Human Conduct.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[11] The Fox and the Cat: A fox was boasting to a cat of its clever devices for escaping its enemies. "I have a whole bag of tricks," he said, "which contains a hundred ways of escaping my enemies." "I have only one," said the cat. "But I can generally manage with that." Just at that moment they heard the cry of a pack of hounds coming towards them, and the cat immediately scampered up a tree and hid herself in the boughs. "This is my plan," said the cat. "What are you going to do?" The fox thought first of one way, then of another, and while he was debating, the hounds came nearer and nearer, and at last the fox in his confusion was caught up by the hounds and soon killed by the huntsmen.Miss Puss, who had been looking on, said, "Better one safe way than a hundred on which you cannot reckon." [J. JACOBS (1996): *The Fables of Æsop.* New York: Schocken Books, p. 91-92].

(the subject of learning), political and value learning (the object of learning), political considerations as conditions for learning or its implementation. There are three fields where these political aspects are concentrated, or rather, where political learning takes place: decision strategies; communication strategies; and attention (help) to victims strategies (care strategies).

Working hypothesis

These reflections are specified in the following statements by way of several general hypotheses:

1. Learning process of political-administrative elites in crisis is specially conditioned by political factors. They are the main driving forces of and barriers to the learning process.
2. Sensitisation is different from learning but is important in the crisis learning process. Sensitisation interferes with the possibility and predisposition of elites to learn.
3. Political learning takes place mainly in three fields: decision strategy, communication strategy and care strategy.
4. Traumatic crises provoke changes in value criteria of political-administrative elites.

Employed Methodology

In order to check our hypothesis we chose the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). NGT was developed early in the seventies by Delbecq and van de Ven, with the purpose of facilitating effective group decision making in social psychological research. Thanks to its flexibility, it allows for considerable diversity in its application in a variety of contexts,

> This technique was revealed as a powerful tool to generate ideas and prioritise issues in a wide range of fields including: education, health, social service, industry, and government organisations.[12]

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[12] M. POTTER; S. GORDON & P. HAMER (2004): "The Nominal Group Technique: A useful consensus methodology in physiotherapy research", in *NZ Journal of Physiotherapy* 32, 3.

It was initially devised for use as a mean of brainstorming the views of the group on a specific problem, and of achieving an aggregate of the group's opinions about the solution to the problem.[13] Contrary to the focus group this technique prevents the appearance of dominant members who impose their opinions on others. NGT avoids dominance by a limited number of group leaders in establishing priorities or goals.[14]

In fact, Kae H. Chung and Michael J. Ferris, in a study that looked at the validity of the nominal group technique, underlined that a "recommendation for the use of nominal group process is that there are some noninteracting group members who are better than the interacting group members in their judgments" [15], and the former are usually silenced by the latter in focus groups.

Another advantage claimed for the NGT is the great number of ideas that are generated in the silent phase. Notwithstanding, this number is always manageable. That is why we chose nominal group over structured interviews in our research:

> We want people to listen to us (...) The process improves listening and the results can be used to benefit the people who shared the information. And people go away feeling good about having been heard.[16]

Although NGT is a structured group activity designed to elicit the views of group members on a given topic, Thad B. Green points out that:

> There were no statistical significant differences between the quantity of nominal group performance and the performance of interacting groups employing permissive, democratic, and authoritarian leadership styles (...) The important finding is that with respect to the total number of responses, the number of

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[13] A. DELBECQ; A. VAN DE VEN. & D. GUSTAFSON. (1971): *Group Techniques for global planning. A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes.* Middleton, WI: Green Briar Press.
[14] A. VAN DEN VEN & A. L. DELBECQ (1971): "Nominal Versus Interacting Group Processes for Committee Decision-Making Effectiveness", in *Academy of Management Journal* 14, 2, 203-212.
[15] K. CHUNG & M. FERRIS (1971): "An Inquiry of the Nominal Group Process"*, in The Academy of Management Journal* 14, 4, 520-524.
[16] R. A. KRUEGER (1994): *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

> unique responses, and the total quality of responses
> there were no significant differences between the
> nominal groups and any of the interacting groups.[17]

Nevertheless, there is a real superiority over interacting groups, and an important strength of the NGTis that it focuses on the participants' points of view, rather than those of the director of the group. Furthermore, with this technique we avoid a real danger that affects focus groups: the views obtained will be those of the dominant members of the group, rather than those of the majority. Moreover, NGT increases creative productivity of shared activities, elicits a critique of generation of ideas, allows results to be considered as a pool of aggregative ideas, and makes use of the energy of the individuals integrated in the group.

> The nominal group technique combines quantitative
> and qualitative data collection in a group setting, and
> avoids problems of group dynamics associated with
> other group methods such as brainstorming, Delphi
> and focus groups. Idea generation and problem
> solving are combined in a structured group process,
> which encourages and enhances the participation of
> group members.[18, 19]

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[17] T. B. GREEN (1975): "An Empirical Analysis of Nominal and Interacting Groups", in *The Academy of Management Journal* 18, 1, p. 71.

[18] M. GALLAGHER; T. HARES; J. SPENCER; C. BRADSHAW & I. WEBB (1993): "The nominal group technique: a research tool for general practice?" In *Family Practice*, 1993, vol. 10, 76-81.

[19] Michael Quinn Patton describes the specific characteristics of quantitative and qualitative research: "Quantitative methods consist of three kinds of data collection: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews; 8"9 direct observation; and (3) written documents, including such sources as open-ended written items on questionnaires, personal diaries, and program records. (…) Qualitative methods permit the evaluator to study selected issues, cases, or events in depth and detail; the fact that data collection is not constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth and detail of qualitative data (…) Qualitative data provide and detail through direct quotation and careful description of program situations, events, people, interactions and observed behaviors. (…) In collecting qualitative data, the evaluators seek to capture the richness of people's experiences in their own terms. Understanding and meaning emerge from in-depth analysis of detailed descriptions and verbatim quotations." (M. Q. PATTON (1987): *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation (CSE Program Evaluation Kit)*. California: Sage, pp. 7-10).

The desirable advantages of the NGT compared with other group techniques are listed in the following table:

Attribute	Delphi	Focus Group	Brainstorming	NGT
Face-to face group meeting process	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Generates a large number of ideas	Yes	Maybe	Maybe	Yes
Avoids focusing on a single train of thought	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Encourages equal input from all participants	Yes	No	No	Yes
Highly structured process	Yes	Maybe	No	Yes
High degree of task completion	Yes	Maybe	No	Yes
Provision of immediate feedback	No	Maybe	Maybe	Yes
Measures the relative importance of ideas generated	Yes	No	No	Yes

Source: Margaret Potter, Dandy Gordon and Peter Hamer, op. cit.

The production of ideas in a NGT is not the result of a common interactive process, but of a silent and individual activity developed in the first step of the technique. That is to say, it is a technique that works like a group only in a formal way[20]. The term nominal refers to a process in which individuals work alone with the results of their efforts later combined and viewed as if the individuals had worked together in a group.[21]

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[20] Why is the anonymous interaction important? It is not our goal to answer this question here, but we do want to remark on the assumption behind the recommendation of a NGT. All the participants, it is felt, posses, at least some valuable qualities for making high quality decisions. Unfortunately, sometimes, these members are not social-interacting members, so an anonymous generation of ideas enhances their ability to provide valuable information. Following Jourard: *As children we are, and we act, our real selves. We say what we think, we scream for what we want, we tell what we did. These spontaneous disclosures meet variable consequences —some disclosures are ignored, some rewarded, and some punished. Doubtless in accordance with the law of reinforcement, we learn early to withhold certain disclosures because of the painful consequences to which they lead. We are punished in our society, not only for what we actually do, but also for what we think, feel or want. Very soon, then, the growing child learns to display a highly expurgated version of his self to others. I have coined the term "public self" to refer to the concept of oneself which one wants others to believe."* [S. M JOURARD (1964): *The Transparent Self.* Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand]. We can say NGT is like a child's game: it has obtained, in a brief period of time, something really interesting for organizations: "transform the boring group meetings into golden opportunities in order to solve problems" and avoid the "energetic crisis of management". (A. L. FORTUNA, (1971): "ntroduction", in *Group Techniques for global planning. A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes.* Middleton, Wi: Green Briar Press, p. 13).

[21] D. W. TAYLOR; P. C. BERRY & C. H. BLOCK (1958): "Does Group Participation When Using Brainstorming Facilitate or Inhibit Creative Thinking?", in *Administrative Science Quarterly* 3, pp. 23-47.

It seems clear to us that the unique contribution of the NGT, the semi-quantitative, rank-ordered feedback data obtained from the participants, makes this technique particularly useful in evaluating the learning process which is produced in the aftermath of a crisis.

If we concede that NGT is, definitively, a technique for idea generation, problem solution, and fact-finding, we must accept that there are unlimited possibilities to its application. Notwithstanding, it seems clear to us that there are certain limits, or more appropriate tasks in which NGT is required. NGT reveals its full potential when:

a) The central issue of the meeting is considered extraordinarily important, or, at least important. (For example: learning process evaluation).
b) We seek the widest vision of the issue. (Crises learning process).
c) The ultimate goal is to prioritise problems or solutions in the framework of a traditional meeting.[22] (Unveil difficulties hidden in crises learning process).

All these things allow us to consider NGT as an evaluation tool, with a constructive and problem-solving approach, that enables the participants to identify the needs of future changes, in order to enhance the lessons that can be extracted from a crisis, and to recognize the weaknesses and strengths of the present learning process.

Graph 1 shows how we understand the role of NGT in the learning process framework.[23] The NGT is inserted in the very process of learning. If we accept that learning is produced in the aftermath of a crisis, we can consider this technique as a step in this learning. The participants, who are political decision-makers involved in crisis management and recovery, elicit, through the NGT, both the mistakes and the wise moves made during the crisis learning process. It is more important to discover the way in which a problem, —a crisis— has been resolved, than the actual solution. There are always a wide variety of ways to solve the crises; some being more

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[22] A. GUILLÉN ZANÓN (1990): "La Técnica del Grupo Nominal", in *Documentación Administrativa* 223, 53-75, p. 56.
[23] We use the very attractive and clear stickman analysis. As we know it was first developed by Economist Jesús Huerta de Soto. (See J. HUERTA DE SOTO (1992): *Socialismo, cálculo económico y función empresarial.* Madrid: Unión Editorial, pp. 80-81.)

time-expensive than others. The less time-expensive ones are advantageous, because of their shortcutting nature: they can be implemented in a brief period of time, and their success can be observed immediately. Nevertheless, the more time-expensive ones, i.e., solutions that take more time to be achieved, are more universal, more valid and have a higher degree of fertility and productivity. Learning takes time; it is a time-expensive process with a universal validity. Therefore NGTs show us what was involved in this process—whether through shortcuts or in an efficient universal way—, and it is included in the process of learning.
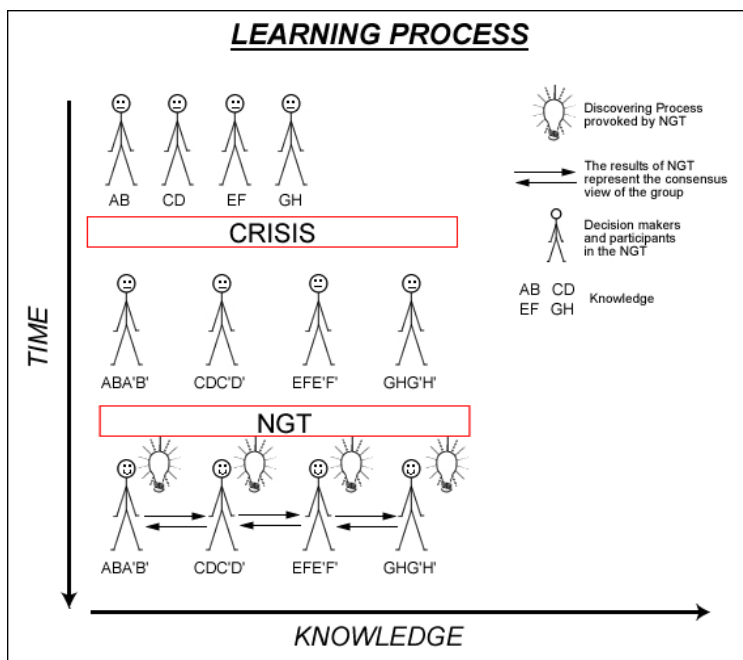
Source: the authors

Our participants were selected because they share certain characteristics with the topic of the focus group. Four of them had direct experience in the Aegean Sea and Prestige crises, —moreover, one of them had direct experience in another previous crisis: the oil spill provoked by the tanker Cason—. There were three analysts and specialised managers in the issue. Finally, we completed the session, with an expert in technological and industrial disasters.

NGT demands that participants be self-spectators, that they analyse their own learning process. The rules of constructive feedback that govern the procedure elicit participants' positive and negative constructive thinking in an inclusive and non-judgemental atmosphere. Participants discover a new interest to be made better off.

Therefore we use NGT as an evaluation tool with a constructive and problem-solving approach that enables the participants to identify the needs of future changes in order to enhance the lessons that can be extracted from a crisis, and to recognize the weaknesses and strengths of the present learning process.

The first question elicited positive comments about the learning process: how much the decision makers learn, and what they learned from the two most significant oil spill crises suffered off the coast of Spain: the Aegean Sea oil spill and the Prestige incident.

The second question, following the constructive approach, elicited suggestions for improvements in the learning process. In order to do so, the participants were confronted with the need to identify what they had not learned from these crises and what to do to improve the possibility of a correct and enduring learning process.

Briefly, can NGT lead to conclusions that improve participants' experience? We can answer this question affirmatively. . The main benefit is a greater understanding of the learning process that the participants underwent as decision makers in both the crises of the Aegean Sea and the Prestige incidents.

Lomax and McLeman[24] pointed out a flaw related to the reduced number of participants in a NGT: there are doubts as to whether the results can be generalized to the whole group of decision makers. Does the NGT process influence the results? Do the results reflect the sum of the individual member's views or the consensus view claimed for the method? If the former, then the results we have obtained may be generalized to a larger fraction of the decision makers.

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[24] P. LOMAX & P. McLEMAN (1984): "The uses and abuses of nominal group technique in Polytechnique evaluation", in *Studies on Higher Education* 9, 183-190.

Another difficulty is related to the role played by the facilitator. Only the complete adherence to the highly structured nature of the process can guarantee that the researcher-bias is minimised. Otherwise, the questions could search to confirm the analyst's hypothesis instead of allowing participants to make a meaningful and free contribution.

In order to overcome this Scylla and Charybdis situation, we implemented two solutions. First, we complete the NGT with a questionnaire, which must be understood as an extension of the issues discussed in the group.

> The questionnaire extension of the NGT provides back-up evidence of the reliability of the data derived from the technique and enables it to be applied to larger groups (…).[25]

Moreover, we developed focus interviews with other decision makers who were involved in the Aegean Sea and Prestige crises. In this sense we can consider the NGT that we carried out as a prior analysis of the situation, in order to elaborate an accurate interview guide setting forth the major areas of inquiry and the hypotheses, which provide relevant criteria for the data to be obtained through the interview.[26]

Secondly, our NGT was directed by an expert facilitator who was not a member of the research team. We seek, by this method, to enhance the objectivity of the results and to avoid the self-confirmation of our hypothesis.

Finally, we would like to point out a line for further investigation. Chung and Ferris, in the article cited above, identify three subgroups in the leaderless discussion sessions. "They are: (a) high talkers (or interacting members), (b) medium talkers (or in-between), and (c) low-talkers (or noninteracting members)."[27] There is no place here to discuss these results, but we have discovered, after the implementation of numerous nominal group techniques, that there is always another specific character among the participants: we call him/her *radical participant.* Usually this specific character is

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[25] G. LLOYD-JONES; S. FOWELL & J. B. BLIGH (1990): "The use of the nominal group technique as an evaluative tool in medical undergraduate education", In *Medical Education* 33, 8-13, p.8.

[26] R. K. MERTON (1990): *Focused Interview*. New York: Free Press.

[27] R. K. MERTON (1990): *Op. Cit.*, p. 521.

unveiled at the very beginning of the session. He express radical ideas related to the issue or the objective of the meeting, and he usually denies the basis of the hypothesis. In our NGT, the radical participant expressed his commitment to the idea of the inexistence of the Aegean Sea and Prestige crises. He stated that these were not crises, but only isolated incidents. A deeper psychological study could be carried out to explain this curious phenomenon. We only want to indicate its existence and to show its advantages:

a) Enhances the discussion of the issues.
b) Obliges other participants to be clearer in their interventions.
c) Provokes a deeper reflection about the ideas generated in the silent phase.
d) Allows a more precise definition of group consensus to appear.

Post empirical conclusions

The reflection and analysis on empirical material products from questionnaires and NGT have been useful in answering some, though not all of the questions we had stated, having generated other important ideas that help to explain the role of political factors in the crisis learning process.

Indeed, political factors have been revealed as absolutely essential in order to explain what political-administrative elites learn. First of all, it is necessary to point out that in this kind of crisis, at least in Spain, political polarization comes out and everything (including the most technical aspects) is more determined by partisan fights than other issues of 'normal' political life. We have to remember that in a crisis, "perceived opportunity, as well as perceived threat, can be a source of stress for crisis participants"[28], even more so if we consider that they fall under close media scrutiny.

Let us look at one important aspect that arose at the beginning of the session: the singularity of every oil tanker accident by itself. That is, each accident is so different from the others that comparisons with other kinds of crises become possible (food crisis, terrorists attacks, natural disasters...). Therefore, although technical learning is possible —and in fact it is produced—, the main learning

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[28] E. STERN (1997): *Op.Cit.* p. 73.

is political, the one element that is common to all these crises, characterized by their presence in mass-media, the general social feeling of risk, and the social demand of effective management.

Among all aspects that have been considered such as drives or barriers to learning in crises, we want to point out the idea of *sensitisation*; this being a positive factor meaning the process of becoming fully aware of the problem, being concerned about it, and predisposed towards a faster and more coherent action. We affirm that government elites' learning is especially biased by political dimension; it is mainly the result of the sensitisation generated by the crisis. The importance of this fact is far greater not only because of the sensitisation that these elites can experience, but because of the sensitisation they can observe in society and the mass media.

Therefore, sensitisation has been revealed as the key or connection between the crises and elites' learning. Administrative-political elites can be sensitised themselves by the facts. Crises interfere with the normal operation of politics, and jeopardize the positive public image presently enjoyed by politicians. At any rate, they are always sensitive to whatever they perceive as social sensitisation, reflected in crisis conspicuousness (the mass-media covered the Prestige crisis for nine months)[29], in opinion polls, and in the continuity of policies related to it.

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[29] N. GONZÁLEZ, F. TALAYERO y M. ROIZ (2003): "El análisis de contenido como método de investigación del discurso social sobre los desastres: el caso del Prestige", Comunicación en la 1ª Sesión técnica del Foro Euromediterráneo sobre Prevención de Catástrofes.
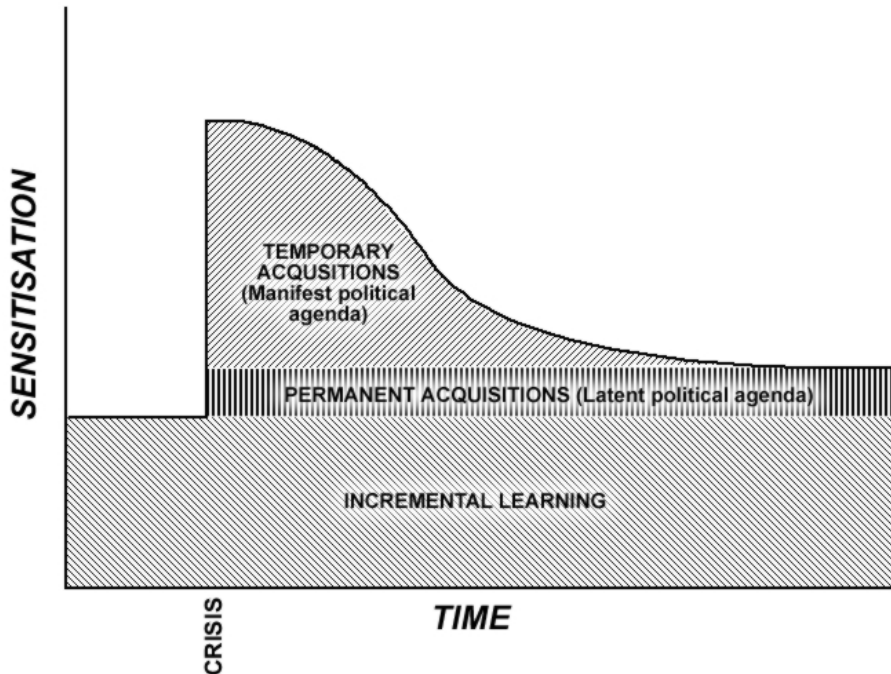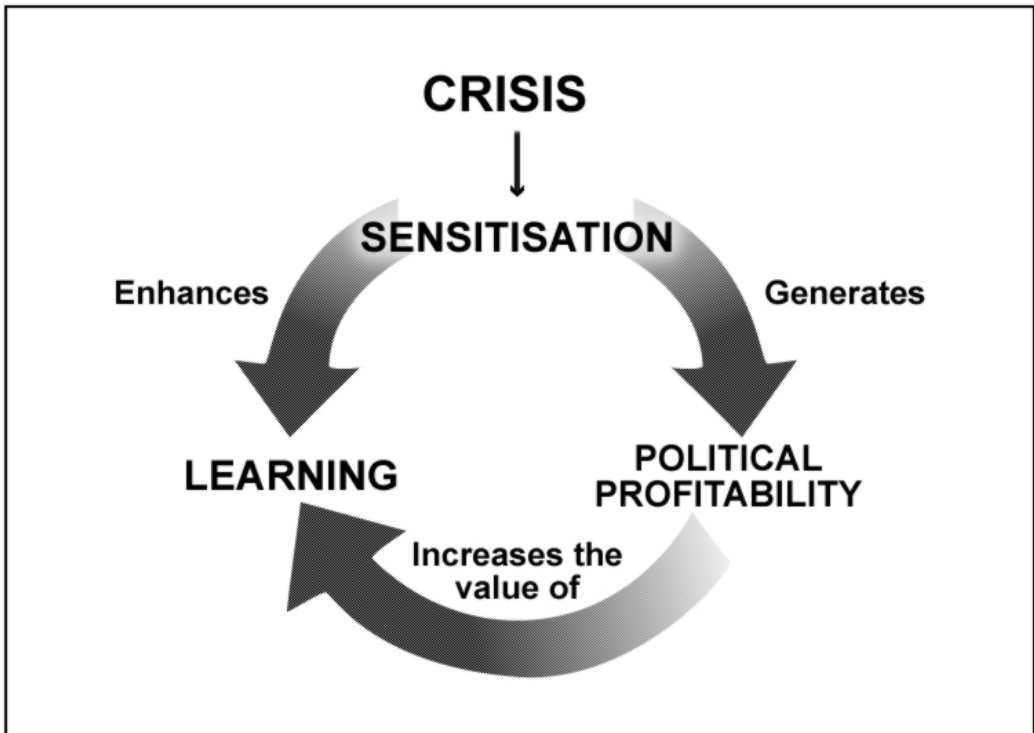
Sensitisation and learning.
Source: the authors

Moreover, crisis management will generate different kinds of learning according to its success or its failure. It seems to us that successful management generates incremental normal learning because sensitisation has little endurance. Notwithstanding, when early crisis management fails, sensitisation takes longer, increasing political profitability which enhances learning.

Political sensitisation is brought about by political profitability. Here we want to introduce an appropriate new concept: the *political profitability bias* (P.P.B.), that concentrates the main explicative force of the relationship between sensitisation and elites'

learning in crises. It is difficult to imagine a government undertaking policies that involve political costs, or anything proved to be unprofitable. This is especially true of learning and implementation of whatever has been learnt from crises that happened in distant points of time.

Sensitisation, P.P.B. & Learning.
Source: the authors

Crisis forecasting is one of the aspects where we can appreciate this bias. This kind of prevention is less profitable than crisis management, mainly because of the following reasons: First, because crisis management always generates profit opportunities (Stern). Second, because prevention policies are not specially differentiated. Third, because politicians think that as long as they

are in charge, crises are not going to happen. In democracies they are not there for a long time, thus they prefer to assume the crisis occurrence risk instead of preventing it. Some time ago Richardson pointed out this relation between crisis and reactive style[30].

But when a crisis has occurred we are in a completely different scene. An environment of sensitisation prevails where social actors become demanders of prevention. Then innovative learning oriented to post-traumatic prevention appears. We were able to observe that after Prestige incident, many policies which had already been designed but not applied were implemented because they unveiled their political profitability.

Secondly, the political profitability bias is a barrier to implementing whatever has been learnt. In the Prestige case, for example, we find the volunteers conundrum (muddle). Political-administrative elites learnt that the massive and chaotic presence of these spontaneous social actors may be extremely dangerous (because of ecological damage) and expensive (because of the tremendous waste they generated). Nevertheless, it is quite improbable that this phenomenon could be limited in similar future events, since this limitation would not be politically correct and, therefore it would not produce political profitability. Quite the contrary, this popular participation legitimates crisis management, that is to say, it creates political profitability.

A third interesting question is how difficult the enforcement of law can be because of political reasons. One of the most required elements to improve crisis management is the increase of coordination.[31] In Spain, the Civil Protection Act establishes the unified command to deal with this kind of crisis. However, since the political cost of applying it without taking regional governments into consideration would be so high, national government does not consider its effective application. Even though the central administration assumes responsibility for decisions, —there is no need to ask for advice from regional or local administrations—,it does

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[30] J. J. RICHARDSON (1982): *Policy Styles in Western Europe*. London: Allen and Unwin.

[31] One interesting issue of debate that appeared in TGN was the role of planning in order to achieve good coordination; but everybody agreed on the need for real unified command. Increasing importance is being given to the idea that the aim of learning to improve crisis management is not to create pre-planned motions, but "to form teams that can move forward in a mutually supportive, structured manner when potentially discomforting signals are detected around sensitive issues" [P. LAGADEC (1997): "Learning Processes for Crisis Management in Complex Organizations", in *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 5, 1, 24- 31, p. 27].

not in fact, act freely: It fears adverse reactions from other administrations and the loss of political profitability which they imply.

We faced a similar problem when the possibility of using shelter harbours was evoked. Although these could be the best solution in ecological and socio-economical terms, there is no room to operate in this direction because political fighting with the affected councils would be far too expensive in political terms. That is to say, it would not be politically profitable.

With regard to the communication strategy, we have confirmed its overwhelming importance as a framework to elites' learning in crisis. As Lagadec says "An actor's power is often determined by his ability to present a strong image to the outside world"[32]. Yet precisely, because of the very existence of the relationship between learning and political profitability, learning from communication is so important. A fortiori, we consider that the crisis picture constructed by the communication process is more relevant than objective data when the time comes for it to be evaluated.

One of the main risks of communication processes is the loss of control over the information delivered; it takes on a life of its own. The goal of good crisis management is to transform the communication process into a leadership process which seeks to channel the tension and victim's doubts, and creates a holding environment (Giulliani's syndrome).

There is a close relation between communication and care strategy. In a previous crisis suffered by this Spanish region, compensations to affected workers were paid several years later, and there were people who complained that they never received them. In the Prestige crisis, however, the government was very interested in this point and started to pay within fifteen days. This is a good sample of political learning. Because of the high political profitability of the indemnifications, they were generous and quickly delivered. In fact, some people felt so satisfied that the idea of the crisis as a beneficial event was experienced.

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[32] P. LAGADEC (1997): *Op. Cit.*, p. 26.

Finally we acknowledge that we have not been able to answer properly the questions about belief systems, values and value criteria. On one side, the aim was to look for the relationship between the different elites' belief systems[33] (more or less ecologically minded, more or less socially generous, etc.) studied through the questionnaires, and their predisposition towards learning. We did not have enough analysis units to investigate this. On the other side, we expected to observe the recognition of changes in values or value criteria, but it was revealed that it is extremely difficult to make people think about what criteria they use to evaluate something, even more so if they have changed those criteria over the time.

In any case, what can be observed from the outside is the way that learning, as criteria value, replaces sustainability. That is to say: before the crisis, nobody is concerned with learning; the important thing to do is to keep those policies already recognised as profitable. Here, we find again the concepts of sensitisation and political profitability at the very core of our analysis. Political-administrative elites change their value criteria since they realise that learning and policy change have an increased value as a result of crisis occurrence.

In conclusion, it is difficult for political-administrative elites to learn, and when they do learn it is difficult for them to see themselves managing another crisis, so they cannot apply whatever they have learnt. At the same time, societies usually lack historical memory, although they are not responsible for this. Therefore, we have to think about the way organizations can keep all this knowledge alive; the knowledge people acquire but cannot maintain and transmit in a proper way.

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[33] Following the belief systems general structure of the Advocacy Coalition Framework [P. A. SABATIER and H. C. JENKINS-SMITH (eds.) (1993): *Policy Change and Learning. An advocacy coalition Approach*. Boulder-san Francisco-Oxford: Westview Press].

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