

CHRISTOPHER HOOD



*Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-Preservation
in Government*



The Blame Game

SPIN, BUREAUCRACY, AND
SELF-PRESERVATION IN GOVERNMENT

Christopher Hood



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The Blame Game

Preface

Talk about “blame games” has become pervasive in modern organizations and politics. Type the term or its variants such as “blame culture” and “teflon politics” into a search engine and you will get tens of millions of hits. This book aims to describe, dissect, and explain the blame game, showing how blame avoidance shapes politics and organizational life and what strategies the various players in “blameworld” from top-level leaders to front-line workers, can use to limit or deflect it. But while the tone of most commentary on the “blame game” and “blame culture” is unequivocally disapproving, I argue that blame is not all bad in social and institutional life. A world without blame would have some major shortcomings, however much we might be jaded by adversarial legalism or by the petty point-scoring of political life. So I go beyond an account of how blame games and blame avoidance work by identifying what is “good” and “bad” blame avoidance and by offering some ideas about how to achieve the right balance between the two.

Any book on the subject of blame avoidance in government and public services should of course begin with an excuse. To explain why it took me nearly a decade to write this book since the inaugural lecture I gave on the subject in Oxford 2001, I could plead the usual academic excuse of administrative distraction, and I’ve certainly had plenty of that in the 2000s. Or, since they say justification is often a better way of avoiding blame than making excuses, I might perhaps try to argue that leaving the argument to ferment and mature was calculated to produce a better book than one that was written more quickly. But it is the reader who has to be the judge of that.

So just what is so fascinating about blame avoidance? Perhaps three things. One is that having become alerted to blame avoidance as a phenomenon, you start to see it everywhere. For instance, where I live the traditional concept of twenty-four-hour policing has been repackaged into something with the warm and cuddly title of “safer neighborhoods” (and who could possibly be against those?). But when you inquire further into what lies behind this unexceptionable slogan, it turns out to mean that the concept of twenty-four-hour policing has been replaced mostly by answering machines that explain that no one’s available to take your call just now. So who exactly do we blame when we’re trying to alert an official someone to (for example) the rampant drug dealing in our local neighborhoods?

A second source of fascination is that blame avoidance is capable of being discussed at all levels, from abstruse philosophical analysis of the nature of responsibility to everyday conversations on the bus or in the bar that swap battle stories about the frustrations of dealing with big organizations whose systems and structures seem to be carefully designed to make ordinary human communication with them as difficult as possible. Cases in point include those organizations that don't put phone numbers on their websites, that send you emails from "teams" rather than from named individuals, or which allow you to complain about them only on special forms that are guaranteed to put off all but the most pertinacious individuals and whose categories are invariably designed not to fit your own particular grievances.

Third, and more specifically for someone who has spent four decades studying politics and public administration, blame avoidance is a way of linking together three things that normally live in separate academic boxes in these fields, namely the way that public organizations and programs are structured, the way the world of spin and public opinion works, and the politics of the standard operating routines to be found in the world of public services and government. Blame avoidance is a way of bringing the analysis of all these normally separated elements to a single point, and also of linking the behavioral or institutional analysis of how organizations work or individuals behave with ideas about how things ought to be (*deontology*, for the professionals). Is blame avoidance all bad? How can we tell the bad from the good varieties? And can we do anything to encourage the good sorts and discourage the bad?

I have incurred many debts over the long years this book has been in the writing. Institutionally, I am grateful to the ESRC Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation at the London School of Economics for moral and intellectual support, for financial help for some of the work that went into the book and for granting me the status of research associate for the whole time that this book was in preparation. I am also indebted for support from the ESRC Programme on Public Services which I directed from 2004 to 2010. I am grateful to the individuals who helped me with researching and honing the material that went into the book, and most particularly Ruth Dixon and Bryony Gill. I owe a lot to the many people who have taught me about the analysis of blame avoidance and shaped my thinking about it, especially my former research students (and now my teachers and collaborators) Raanan Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Will Jennings. I am deeply grateful to Martin Lodge for reading through all the chapters of the book in draft and helping me to improve the argument, and to anonymous reviewers from Princeton University Press who provided the right kind of mix of encouragement and criticism. I am grateful to the various audiences on three continents, in places as far apart as Beijing,

Granada, Florence, and Dayton, who have been subjected to various parts and stages of the argument over the years, for the mixture of encouragement and sharp questioning that helped me to move forward. I'm grateful to Richard Baggaley, formerly of Princeton University Press, for combining persistent progress monitoring with forbearance over delays and very helpful suggestions for improvement while the book was being written; and I'm also indebted to Chuck Myers, Kim Williams, and all the other people at Princeton University Press who helped and encouraged me to get the manuscript into shape. For the many errors that no doubt remain after all this help, I really cannot think of any way to avoid taking the blame myself.

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Oxford

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PART ONE

Blame, Credit, and Trust in Executive Government

Credit Claiming, Blame Avoidance, and Negativity Bias

There are ... more winners than losers [from extending free trade]. But it's the losers you see in the streets.

—Pascal Lamy, Director-General of the World Trade Organization, interviewed after international trade talks in Hong Kong in December 2005¹

The small group of journalists who shouted questions at the press secretary every day in the White House Briefing Room had a very different agenda [from that of Bill Clinton's spin doctors]. They were focused, almost fixated, on scandals, on ... malfeasance and misfeasance and plain old embarrassments.... They were interested in conflict ... in behind-the-scenes maneuvering....

—Howard Kurtz 1998: xix

STRIKING ATTITUDES AND OBSERVED PERFORMANCE: THREE PUZZLES ABOUT MODERN GOVERNANCE

You're riding on a city bus in the middle of a heat wave following a cold snap.² To everyone's extreme discomfort, the bus has its heating turned full on. You go to the obvious point of contact—the bus driver—to express your anger at this absurd state of affairs and ask for the heating to be shut off immediately. But you find the bus driver claims not to be to blame and says many of the buses in the city still have their heating on, because only the company mechanics can alter the heat settings on the buses. If you have the time and patience to pursue the matter further, you may find that the mechanics deny all blame as well, and tell you their labor union blames the company for not hiring enough mechanics to service the buses properly. But then you find the bus company managers blame the city's transport licensing authority for setting the fares for riders at a level that doesn't allow the company to hire more than a few mechanics. And the licensing authority says ...

Welcome to "blameworld" and the blame game. Most readers will have been there, in some form. The example given above might seem fairly trivial, though even that scenario might be life-threatening for some people.

But the same pattern can often be found in graver situations—for example, when large numbers of people lose their life savings or pension entitlement as a result of some policy change or company collapse, after years of careful saving for the future. So why do we find such a pattern so commonly repeated, in spite of decades of expert suggestions (Hirschmann 1981: 463) and high-flown rhetoric from reformers promising to make government and public services more customer-focused and better coordinated than before?

Similarly, why do we so often find the handling of risk in public services to be inflexible and unintelligent, often increasing our exposure to some kinds of risk in the name of reducing the incidence of others? Why does so little seem to come out of all those earnest reports, task forces, and government initiatives calling for imaginative, proportionate, results-focused regulation? For instance, how do we account for the sort of logic that causes rural railways to close down by insisting on unaffordable safety upgrades and thereby forces their erstwhile passengers to travel on the roads instead, with much higher risks of death and injury?³

Finally, when we get caught up in the aftermath of some unfortunate event that has taken its toll on our peace of mind, our bank balances, or even life and limb, why does responsibility so often prove to be extraordinarily elusive? Public organizations almost everywhere are exposed to successive reform and restructuring exercises purporting to clarify responsibility and improve accountability. So why do official and media inquiries after major failures time and time again find “smoking gun” evidence of who knew or did what when so hard to pin down?

These questions go to the heart of the conduct of modern executive government and public services, and this book argues that the answer to them lies in large part in the way blame avoidance shapes the conduct of officeholders, the architecture of organizations, and their operating routines and policies. It aims to dissect and describe some of the main strategies of blame avoidance, showing how they work and how they play into blame games. But it will also argue that blame avoidance, though often derided, can have positive as well as negative effects sometimes, raising the question of what should count as “good” or “bad” blame avoidance.

A KEY TO THE PUZZLE? THE LOGIC OF BLAMEWORLD

This book argues that there is a link between the types of behavior highlighted at the outset. The common thread is that they are all a product of the logic and politics of blame avoidance triumphing over the “good governance” bromides that pervade—or pollute, as some might say—modern government and public services. The mechanisms by which that sort of

triumph occurs are subtle, and they are to be found deep in the way organizations work and their members behave. The triumph is unintended, at least in the sense that it goes against the declared thrust of reform policies for government and public services for at least a generation. The blame-avoidance imperative applies as much, if not more, to the behavior of appointed officials in government as to that of elected politicians. It often extends to private or independent sector providers of public services too.

What we are dealing with here is a type of risk that seems curiously unmentionable in the official corporate lexicon of risk management—namely the risk of blame. And that is curious, because risk in general is anything but unmentionable in today’s world.⁴ Indeed, over the last decade or so, risk has acquired all the conventional academic trappings of research centers, specialist journals, PhDs, and elaborately titled professorial chairs. In the business world it became central to the world of audit and corporate governance, in the attempt to control the kinds of failures that led to the great financial crash of 2008. In government it became the heart of a set of growing bureaucratic empires that regulate risks at work, environmental risks, food and drug risks, medical risks, financial risks, and many others besides, typically declaring their regulation to be “risk-based” in the sense that it purports to proportion the weight of regulatory action or monitoring to the perceived risks posed by different organizations, rather than treating all organizations equally.⁵

All that risk management activity in contemporary government and business has often been noticed, documented, and commented on.⁶ But most of it is officially concerned with risks to society or to corporate organizations. In contrast, this book puts the spotlight on the risk of personal blame faced by public officeholders, including politicians, managers, professionals, and front-line bureaucrats. That is a type of risk and risk management that is rather less commonly identified on the management-seminar circuit. And curiously—or tellingly—it does not have any conventional term-of-art label. We could call it “reputational risk,” one of the conventional categories of modern risk analysis, but that term is more often used for corporate brands rather than individual officeholders. We could call it “political risk,” but that term is conventionally used in the risk management industry to mean risks to which businesses or investors are exposed by government decisions that are adverse to them, for instance the likelihood of expropriation of property, predatory taxation, or obstructive regulation. So we shall simply call it “blame risk” for the purposes of this book.

Accordingly, this book puts blame risk in government and its associated organizations into the foreground and under the spotlight. By doing that, we can both become more aware of blame-avoidance practices across

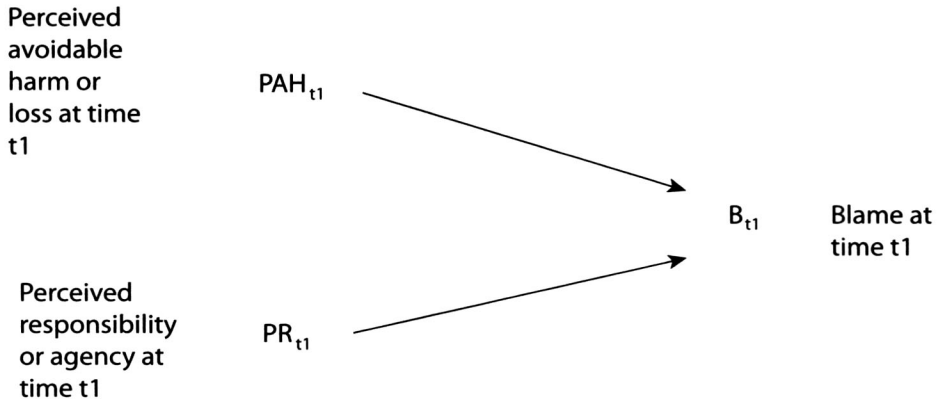


Figure 1.1. Two Key Elements of Blame. Source: Adapted from Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood 2005: 2.

the institutional world and start to find answers to some of those puzzles that we began with, about disjunctures between officially stated claims and observed behavior. That is because the management of blame risk—perhaps contrary to intention and usually in an unacknowledged way—so often shapes the organization and operation of modern executive government, producing its own curious logic of administrative architecture and policy operation.

So what exactly are blame and blame risk? Conventionally, blame is taken to mean the act of attributing something considered to be bad or wrong to some person or entity.⁷ And it therefore involves at least two components that are depicted in figure 1.1. One, denoted as PAH, is some element of perceived and avoidable harm or loss—something is seen as being worse for some person or group than it could have been if matters had been handled differently. A second, denoted as PR, is some attribution of agency—that harm was avoidable because it was caused by acts of omission or commission by some identifiable individual or organization or possibly some more abstract institution such as “capitalism” or “patriarchy” (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood 2005: 3). Both of those components can vary according to the point in time when avoidable loss and agency are perceived.⁸ That aspect of blame may seem less obvious, but to see its relevance you need only think of all those cases where parents say to their children, “This may upset you now, but you’ll thank me for it later” (or words to that effect). Attempts to deflect blame often involve working on the time dimension, as well as on the agency and loss dimensions. And, as we shall see later, some forms of blame avoidance are anticipative—they involve efforts to “stop blame before it starts”—whereas others are reac-

tive, and involve operating in a fire-fighting mode after trouble has started.

Individuals can of course blame themselves for avoidable losses and harms (there is a substantial literature on self-blame in psychology), and indeed if you are alone on a desert island, you will have no one—or at least no human being—to blame but yourself. But as soon as there are at least two people on that desert island, blaming becomes a social or political activity, and that is the focus of this book. Blaming in that social sense is something that in principle extends across the whole spectrum of society from high-level potentates to the person in the street. Who you blame for what is a central marker of your culture and attitudes (Douglas 1990). As a social process, blaming must involve at least two sets of actors, namely blame makers (those who do the blaming) and blame takers (those who are on the receiving end). Those two roles come together in “blame games”—a term that came to be heavily used in the 2000s⁹—when multiple players are trying to pin the responsibility on one another for some adverse event, acting as blamers to avoid being blamees. And the consequences of blame can vary from mild social embarrassment to deep shame or extreme legal sanctions involving loss of life or liberty.

Blaming is often distinguished from “naming” and “claiming,” following a well-known sociological account of the emergence of legal disputes, developed by William Felstiner and his colleagues (1980) thirty years ago. In that analysis (Felstiner et al. 1980: 635), naming means the identification and recognition of some experience as injurious. Examples include Gulf War syndrome, repetitive strain injury, pension mis-selling, subprime lending. Such naming is a necessary first step for blaming, which is the attribution of responsibility for injurious experience (to departments of defense, employers, and banks in the examples given above). The Felstiner scheme is thus another way of identifying perception of avoidable loss and attribution of agency as central elements in blaming. And in the Felstiner analysis, blaming is in turn a necessary precursor for claiming in the sense of seeking some remedy from the individual or entity held to be responsible. The claiming can range from demands for explanation to monetary compensation, the resignation or dismissal of those who are culpable, or official expressions of sorrow ranging from corporate apologies to more or less drastic acts of contrition by individual officeholders.

Why—or when—should public officeholders care about the risk of blame? On the face of it, that might seem an odd question. After all, most of us as human beings can be expected to care about blame simply because wanting to be well thought of is a normal psychological trait. Beyond that, public officeholders have obvious reasons for concern with management of blame. Elected politicians will care about blame if they think it will reduce their chances of re-election. Managers will care about

blame if they think it will reduce their prospects of promotion, bonuses, staying in their current jobs, or moving on to better ones. Professionals will care about blame if they think it will diminish their reputations in ways that could damage their careers or produce expensive lawsuits over malpractice. Front-line bureaucrats will care about blame if they think it will cost them their jobs or their bonuses or their chances of promotion, or bust them back down to the ranks.

Even so, not everyone can be expected to care equally about all types of blame in all circumstances. After all, that psychological need to be well thought of and therefore to avoid blame is not equally distributed in human populations. Some personality types seem to have less concern to avoid blame than others, as in the case of psychopaths who do not exhibit the “usual” sense of moral responsibility (Elliott 1992). At the other end of the scale are those whose lives can be shattered by the smallest damage to their reputations. Our aversion to blame may vary over the course of our lives as well. We will be more motivated to engage in efforts to avoid blame the more likely we think blame will occur and the more serious we think the consequences will be for us if we do come to be blamed.

Variations in concern about blame are not just a matter of individual personality. Social settings and institutional background also seem to play a part. In so-called blame cultures, when every trifling error is watched for and the least step out of line pounced upon, there will be more pressure to avoid blame than in social settings where there is higher tolerance of others’ faults and failings, such as therapy groups for those suffering from addiction or intimate gatherings of old friends.

Indeed, there is a whole literature on “high-reliability organization” (for example, Sagan 1993) that makes much of the idea that concentration on blame varies from one kind of organization to another. In politics and government bureaucracy too, concern with blame is likely to vary with circumstances. A politician who has just won a landslide victory or is about to retire from office is likely to be less concerned with blame than one on the eve of an election in a close race. Similarly, a judge or bureaucrat (or professor) whose continuing tenure does not depend on re-election or reappointment can normally afford to be more relaxed about blame than one in different circumstances.

So the importance of blame risk is not a constant but a variable, and that variability may explain the extent to which we can observe behavior of the type highlighted at the outset (that is, defensive lack of integration among organizations, defensively disproportionate regulation, defensively vague accountability trails). If social developments make blame risk more or less salient over time, we might expect the incidence of such behavior to vary accordingly. And we might expect exceptions to such defensive