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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Analysing policy success and failure in Australia: Pink batts and set-top boxes

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Abstract

This article examines two Australian government programs from the Rudd/Gillard Labor government, the Home Insulation Program (HIP) and the Digital Switchover Household Assistance Scheme (HAS). Both became shibboleths of the Labor government's perceived waste and incompetence. Using key informant interviews and documents obtained under freedom of information (FOI), I analyse these programs against the multiple 'dimensions' of success proposed by Newman and common narrative frames around programme failure. I argue that the HAS was broadly successful across most dimensions of success, notwithstanding the adverse media attention. The study identifies four key factors driving HIP's failure: scheme design, installer training, demand control, and departmental expertise. All of these came back to the timeline pressures, driven by conflicting priorities, which in turn gave the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) more influence than would usually be the case. In comparison, HAS's success is attributed to crucial design choices, like the phased rollout and head contractor model. The article identifies the danger of ignoring subject matter expertise and poor policy/Cabinet pro-

cesses, which have been reinforced by the recent Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme.

KEYWORDS
policy evaluation, policy failure, policy success

Points for practitioners

- Demand-driven programmes need to have demand-side control techniques built into them.
- The role of central agencies needs to be carefully considered, particularly in relation to areas that are not their expertise, such as detailed programme development and implementation.
- Lessons about poor policy and Cabinet processes, as well as cultural change from the Pink Batts Royal Commission, do not appear to have been sufficiently embedded in the culture of the APS, as there are ongoing echoes of the same problems evident in the Robodebt Royal Commission.

1 | INTRODUCTION

From mid-2009, until late 2013, more than 12,000 government-funded tradies roamed the country, going into vulnerable people's homes and climbing into ceiling cavities and onto roofs[1]. One cohort worked on the now-infamous Home Insulation Program (HIP), colloquially known as the 'pink batts' programme. The other worked on the lesser-known, but more successful, Digital Television Switchover Household Assistance Scheme (HAS), providing free digital set-top boxes (STBs) and antennas for pensioners. Both policies were developed around the same time, using similar programme designs, involving government intervention in a market in which the government would not usually be involved. Both were designed to be a large, one-off programme, which could be implemented across the country and then announce, 'Mission Accomplished'. Each programme had a focus on timelines. Yet, one resulted in four deaths, more than 200 fires, and a Royal Commission. The other was begrudgingly recognised as a success by the Opposition spokesperson.

Drawing on Newman (2014), I consider four dimensions in evaluating failure/success—process, goal achievement, distributional outcomes, and political consequences. I argue that pink batts was a failure across all dimensions, but HAS was successful across the first three, with mixed political consequences. I identify key programme design decisions for each programme, which lead to vastly different outcomes. Four issues drove the failure of pink batts—scheme design; installer/product regulation and training; failure to limit/control demand; and lack of departmental skill. These can all (at least in part) be attributed to the timeline pressures, which were driven by conflicting priorities. These pressures then gave the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) more influence in detailed programme design and implementation than would

usually be the case. The lack of these pressures, as well as different external pressures in HAS, helped ensure that vastly different programme design choices were made. Then, I explore why the HAS succeeded where the HIP failed, given these are two schemes developed more or less simultaneously, with a number of very similar features. Drawing on McConnell (2018, p. 677), I consider the three main elements of the causes of policy failure, namely 'individual decision-makers; institutions/policy processes; and deeper societal values and power structures/interests'.

The article is structured as follows: I first set out the criteria for success and failure that will be used to evaluate each programme, exploring what the literature reveals about common causes of success and failure. I then set out the source of my data (document analysis; freedom of information [FOI] requests; and interviews) and then analyse the policy failure (pink batts), before turning to the policy success (HAS). I conclude by considering the comparative lessons.

2 | EVALUATING SUCCESS AND FAILURE

This section first looks at the criteria for determining whether a policy/programme was a success or failure and then briefly reviews the literature on the common causes of success and failure. No criteria for success and failure were set in advance of the empirical analysis. Rather, the interviews sought to explore how they viewed success and failure. A range of different perspectives came out, broadly aligning with the existing literature on dimensions of success and failure (McConnell, 2010, 2017; Newman, 2014).

The literature emphasises that programmes can have numerous outcomes, each measured in different ways, and urges scholars and practitioners to 'move beyond the often crude, binary rhetoric of success and failure' (McConnell, 2010, p. 346). Scholars have developed different frameworks, dimensions, or layers of measuring success/failure. As well as these different dimensions, there is a recognition that often 'success' or 'failure' is not an 'objective fact' and is a matter of perspective and interpretation.

> a policy is successful insofar as it achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve. However… only those who regard the original goal as desirable are likely to perceive its achievement in this way. [Therefore]… A policy is successful if it achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal. (McConnell, 2010, p. 351; emphasis in original)

Based on the interview findings, I have decided to draw mainly on Newman (2014) to evaluate the programs, who identified four categories of policy evaluation: process; goal attainment; distributional outcomes; and political consequences (Table 1). However, I focus on those areas where there was an overlap between the two programmes; where there was an opportunity for knowledge transfer; or where there are similarities and differences to be drawn out. As such, this is not a comprehensive evaluation of either programme.

Identifying whether a programme is a failure or success allows us to then consider what *caused* that outcome and attempt to identify generalisable lessons. McConnell (2018, p. 677) identifies three main elements to most narratives around policy failure, namely 'individual decision-makers; institutions/policy processes; and deeper societal values and power structures/interests'. He emphasises that 'bad decisions' generally do not exist in a vacuum and are usually a product of their environment and institutional settings (McConnell, 2018). While using different language, this tripartite separation of potential root causes is evident in other literature. Dunleavy (1995) analysed the institution and processual factors in the United Kingdom and identified the lack of

TABLE 1 Four categories of policy evaluation.

Process	Goal attainment	Distributional outcomes	Political consequences
Indicator of success	Indicator of success	Indicator of success	Indicator of success
Public policy is converted into substantive legislation or public programming.	Stated policy objectives are achieved.	Some groups benefit from a particular policy, in specific ways, to a certain degree.	Governments or other political actors benefit from the public reaction to, or perception of, a policy.
Significance	Significance	Significance	Significance
Connects policy inputs to policy outputs.	Addresses the 'top-down' aspect of policy formulation and implementation.	Addresses the 'bottom-up' aspect of policy implementation.	Accounts for the cyclical nature of the policy process.
Limitations	Limitations	Limitations	Limitations
Inputs and outputs may not be evaluated according to the same criteria.	Objectives may be unclear, unstated, or falsely represented. Long-term objectives may be different from short-term objectives.	How groups benefit can be subjective, so 'success' must be defined in terms of 'success for whom'.	There may be a significant time dimension to political consequences, which could obscure evaluation in the short term.

Source: Newman (2014), table 2.

checks and balances on the executive, which results in rushed policy development and under-scrutinised legislation; a lack of subject-matter expertise in the civil service; and an undue focus on political responsiveness from senior civil servants. Shergold (2015) looked specifically at the Australian context and, like Dunleavy (1995), identified policy process and institutional factors, including good Cabinet processes and properly resourced and skilled institutions. Similar factors were identified by Di Francesco (2000), also in the Australian context, and FitzGerald et al. (2019, p. 12) in a European context provided a good summary of the literature:

> A good decision-making process that gathers the right information, hears a variety of arguments, understands the level of uncertainty, is made by the appropriate people and at the right time should produce better policy outcomes than one made too early in the process, based on poor or insufficient information, that prioritises certain arguments for the wrong reasons, that does not understand risk, and that is made by people without the skill set [needed].

I draw on the frames identified by McConnell (2018) where they assist in identifying causes of failure or where potential failure was averted.

3 | METHOD AND DATA

My research method for HIP was an analysis of primary documents and a review of the existing literature (Dollery & Hovey, 2010; Kortt & Dollery, 2012; Lewis, 2010). HAS, however, has not been studied in an academic context. I conducted searches of contemporary newspaper coverage;

Hansard and committee hearings; and government reports. FOI requests were also used, with over 1600 pages of previously unavailable documents released[2]. The FOI request helps to triangulate evidence from interviews and helps address issues such as loss of memory/forgetfulness, social desirability bias, and representativeness of the interview sample (Bleich & Pekkanen, 2013; Savage & Hyde, 2014). However, there are also limits to FOI (Casey, 2022; Casey & Black, 2024), and in this case, a large number of documents that the author requested appear to have been lost or misplaced[3].

I also interviewed nine former public servants and political advisors who worked on the programme[4], most of whom agreed to be named. This is particularly useful, given this included the head of the Digital Switchover Taskforce (Townend, 2023) and ministerial advisor in Senator Conroy's office (Dawson, 2023) at the time the programme was designed, as well as three other senior executive service officers (Cullen, 2023; McMahon, 2023; Pelling, 2023). Potential interviewees were identified through a combination of personal contacts of the author, snowball techniques, and LinkedIn searches. The response rate was slightly over 50%. All the interviewees were involved in HAS and therefore had an incentive to say that the programme was a 'success'. However, the focus of my questions was on why the programme was successful and how the pink batts scheme impacted the implementation of HAS. On those two matters, there is less likely to be a personal agenda.

Finally, I draw on my own experiences and knowledge of HAS. My position makes it unreasonable to suggest that this article is entirely a detached analysis. Previous work experiences can inspire real-world relevant research questions (Casey & Fletcher, 2023), so to ignore my knowledge would be to ignore potentially important and relevant information (Brigg & Bleiker, 2010). Consistent with Brigg and Bleiker (2010), I argue that my personal experiences are able to generate relevant insights—I wrote the Cabinet submission; I verbally briefed both the Minister and Secretary prior to Cabinet meetings; and I wrote and evaluated the first tenders. This, however, must be balanced by my ongoing confidentiality requirements, especially in relation to Cabinet processes and deliberations.

4 | POLICY FAILURE

In the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the Australian government, like governments around the world, provided a variety of stimulus measures. While the success (or otherwise) of the stimulus measures has been debated elsewhere, Australia was one of the few developed economies to not go into a recession (Bajada & Trayler, 2010; Saunders & Wong, 2011). Like other OECD nations, Australia's stimulus included a variety of environmental policies, designed to leverage the crisis to achieve both economic and environmental aims (Agrawala et al., 2020).

In Australia, one of the major environmental projects was the HIP, initially administered by the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA) and later administered by the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency (DCCEE). The government estimated that the programme would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50 million tonnes by 2020. Newly insulated homes were forecast to save $200 per year in energy bills (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014). The programme was announced on 3 February 2009, as part of a broader economic stimulus package (Rudd, 2009b). The scheme allowed people to immediately install insulation and claim up to $1600 back from the government. From 1 July 2009, the second stage of the programme commenced, allowing installers to directly bill the government for up to $1600, meaning that the insulation was 'free' for customers. This change in the service design

model became a crucial factor in the policy failure. After four deaths, the scheme was terminated in February 2010 and subject to at least 8 different inquiries, including four coronial inquests, an Auditor-General's report, a specific Senate inquiry, and a Royal Commission (Auditor-General, 2010; Hawke, 2010; Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014; Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts, 2010).

An analysis of the literature reveals failings on a variety of fronts. The Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program (2014, p. 5) identified seven main failures, which I have put under four sub-headings:

- There was conflict/tension between the competing objectives of the programme.
- Insufficient resources were provided to the responsible department.
- Risk processes relating to demand management.
- Risk processes relating to installers and insulation products:
  - There were inadequate risk management systems and advice.
  - Inadequate controls and product standards meant that inappropriate products were used.
  - Active decisions to reduce/relax the training and competency requirements.
  - Allowing the programme to commence with inadequate audit and compliance systems in place.
  - Relying on state and territories to monitor, regulate, and enforce workplace health and safety (WH&S) requirements.

Across all the dimensions of success, the programme was a failure.

Dimension	Outcome	Relevant failings identified by the Royal Commission
Process	The programme that was delivered differed from what the Cabinet considered.	There was conflict/tension between the competing objectives of the programme. Insufficient resources were provided to the responsible department.
Goal attainment	The environmental benefits were significantly less than announced, partially due to poor quality or unsafe installations. More than 20% of homes with foil installation had the installation removed, due to safety concerns (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014). The government claimed the programme would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by almost 50 million tonnes by 2020. Subsequent evaluations have suggested that it could be as low as 6 million tonnes (Tienhaara, 2015).	There was conflict/tension between the competing objectives of the programme.

(Continues)

Dimension	Outcome	Relevant failings identified by the Royal Commission
Distributional outcomes	Four deaths and hundreds of fires. Significant waste of money, with around $420 million spent on remediation programs (Auditor-General, 2010). Large financial losses in the industry (written off stock and plant) (Lewis, 2010).	Risk processes relating to demand management. Risk processes relating to installers and insulation products: There was conflict/tension between the competing objectives of the programme.
Political consequences	There were major negative political consequences, including the demotion of the responsible minister (Moncrieff-Hill, 2010) and falling opinion polls (Canberra Times, 2010).	All

From the outset, the dual objectives were clear, with then Prime Minister the Hon. Kevin Rudd announcing that '[t]his is a very useful thing for the planet, for greenhouse gas emissions, but beyond that as well, stimulus in the economy' (Rudd, 2009b) and that the scheme will 'support jobs and set Australia up for a low carbon future' (Rudd, 2009a). As the details of the programme were developed, the dual objectives became competing objectives, with the stimulus objectives overriding all others, including health and safety.

The stimulus objective meant that timelines were the key factor in most decisions on how the programme was designed (Auditor-General, 2010). When initially developed, considered by Cabinet, and announced, the intention was for the Government to set up head contracts with specific regional contractors, responsible for managing the installation of insulation across their region. This would have allowed for a staged, regional rollout, enabling the programme to be tested before a national rollout (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014). Both the ANAO and the Royal Commission said that this approach would have brought technical expertise—one senior public servant gave evidence that 'we were assuming that the installers would be all large established insulation companies' (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014, p. 74), which would reduce OH&S risks and provide assurance that installers were properly trained.

However, about 2 months after the initial announcement, and less than 3 months before the second stage commenced, the delivery model was radically changed, for two reasons. Firstly, it became apparent that the regional delivery model could not be ready by 1 July 2009 and secondly due to a desire to allow 'new entrants and small guys' to participate in the scheme (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014, p. 105). The Office of the Co-ordinator General (OCG), within PM&C, argued that a different implementation model would allow for consumer choice. The model adopted allowed consumers to choose from any registered installer, and then the installer would be paid directly by the government. Moving from the regional delivery to a 'direct access' model removed the risk controls that were inherent in the initial model. The changed model was 'to a significant extent the cause of later failures' (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014, p. 157). As well as a poor policy decision, it was also a product of poor processes. The public service never sought the approval of the Prime Minister, Cabinet, or the relevant Minister for this major deviation from the model agreed to by the Cabinet (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014).

The second failure, also related to time pressures, was a lack of adequate training and competency requirements for installers or minimum product requirements. This was a deliberate

decision, designed to remove barriers to entry and to quickly create additional jobs. It meant that people could participate in the programme 'without any experience, qualifications or insulation specific training' (Auditor-General, 2010, p. 29). While there were 'supervision' requirements, in practice this often meant that the 'supervisor' would drop off the untrained, inexperienced installer at the job site and then pick them up at the end of the job—despite assumptions that the supervisor would be 'in the roof' with the installer (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014, p. 174).

The third failure was a lack of mechanisms to limit demand, which the Auditor-General (2010) said should be a standard consideration in planning demand-driven programmes. Demand-side control had been under consideration during policy development, including a price signal (by ensuring that the value of the rebate necessitated a co-payment by the customer) or continuing to require the customer to pay the installer upfront and then claim the rebate. The regional rollout model would also have embedded demand control, as the programme could then be opened to different regions at different times and customers would have only one choice of installation company in their region, which would then manage the rollout. However, dampening demand would have been directly contrary to the jobs and stimulus objectives of the programme.

DEWHA, which was initially responsible for the scheme, also lacked the skills to implement and manage a programme such as this (indeed, it had never previously delivered a high-volume demand-driven programme), and it also lacked in-depth knowledge of this industry and business environment and failed to listen sufficiently to stakeholders (Auditor-General, 2010).

While every failure is somewhat unique, if we want to be able to draw out generalisable lessons to reduce the likelihood of such failures in the future, we need to try and identify underlying causes (or risk factors), such as those McConnell (2018) suggested. In this case, the primary issues were 'institutional/policy process centred', relating to the Cabinet and policy development process failures, as well as the cultural issues within the APS. The Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program (2014, pp. 82–83) noted that the policy development process was 'unorthodox' and rushed, which had limited the opportunities for the policy to be refined and improved and severely restricted agencies' opportunities to consider and critique the initial policy proposal. This also led to 'a failure properly to clarify roles and responsibilities' of relevant departments and ministers. While part of this could reflect the crisis atmosphere in the wake of the GFC, others have shown that Mr Rudd ran poor Cabinet and policy processes (Grattan, 2020; Wilson, 2014), which severely hampered the public services' ability to properly develop and scrutinise policy. Shergold (2015, p. v), reflecting on the failures of HIP, implicitly recognised that poor Cabinet processes were a contributing factor, by recommending improvements to Cabinet processes to 'safeguard against rushed, uninformed, or poorly conceived decisions'.

The other underlying issue was a cultural failure, pervasive throughout the APS, of a fear of giving bad news to the minister. In the case of HIP, the public servants failed to inform the relevant ministers about the major risks associated with the timeframe (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014). Unfortunately, previous public administration failures have shown that this is not a new phenomenon (Weller, 2002) and continues to be a problem (Casey & Maley, 2024; Holmes AC SC, 2023). Or in the words of the Royal Commission:

> The HIP was hurriedly conceived and hastily implemented. It failed because of the insistence… for undue speed in its implementation. (Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program, 2014, p. 157)

5 | POLICY SUCCESS

Moving now to the second programme, the Digital Switchover HAS, administered by the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE). I argue this was a policy success, in part because it made different decisions when confronted with similar problems as pink batts. Why did this scheme succeed, given these are two schemes developed around the same time, with similar features, and both facing similarly problematic Cabinet processes and APS cultural problems?

HAS was part of a broader programme to switch from analogue TV to digital TV ('digital switchover'). The world was transitioning from analogue to digital, which was designed to create space on the radio spectrum, upgrade infrastructure, and improve consumer services (Trinidad García Leiva et al., 2006), with expectations that selling the spectrum freed up by the switchover would be a major revenue bonanza (Given, 2018). The switchover was a major infrastructure change, with estimates that around 15 million TVs would become obsolete (House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Communications, Information, Technology and the Art, 2006). The then Minister, Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy, suggested that this was the 'largest change… since the introduction of decimal currency' (ABC, 2008). In the face of this required behavioural change, governments faced the question of whether they would actively assist vulnerable cohorts to transition from analogue to digital. And if so, which cohorts? And what form of assistance?

The normative value of HAS depends on how important you consider TV to be and the degree of responsibility the government has to enable access to TV. Elderly people, people living alone, and lower income people all spend more time watching TV compared to the rest of the population (ABS, 2011). For elderly people, television is often an important way to find comfort, connection, and engagement (Fisher et al., 2021; Smith, 2012). Junior-APS3 (2023) commented 'everyone can joke about TV being a luxury… that's crap, right? TV's integral to the fabric of people and their wellbeing and their lives'. Cullen (2023) similarly reflected '[it was] a massive, massive risk for the government… if you switch people's TV off, it's a massive risk'. Thus, it implicitly had already been decided that having vulnerable people lose access to television was a 'problem worth solving' (Wildavsky, quoted in Dery [2000, p. 40]).

Having decided that some form of assistance would be provided, the next part of the 'problem definition' was to consider 'the root cause of the problem', which was, as Bali et al. (2019, p. 6) suggest, a 'contested and conflictual exercise'. The policy debate focused on who should be provided with assistance and what assistance should be provided. These two questions intersected, as the underlying question was 'what hurdle or disadvantage needed to be overcome to make the transition to digital TV'? A range of options were considered, including vouchers and rebates (Auditor-General, 2012). The central agencies, in particular PM&C and the Department of Finance and Administration, were advocating for a voucher-type programme (Cullen, 2023); a cash handout; or even getting 'Rotary members, or Boy Scouts' to do the installations (McMahon, 2023).

However, despite the central agencies' objections, once the problem was defined as a lack of technical skills, the solution needed to match—the government opted for in-home assistance, with a trained installer coming to eligible people's homes, providing an STB, installing it, replacing the antenna if required, and demonstrating how to use the STB. The target group was people who needed technical assistance but could not afford to pay for it themselves—namely people on the maximum rate of certain Centrelink payments (Age Pension; Disability Support Pension; Carer Payment; and equivalent veterans' payments). People on unemployment payments were excluded.

Looking at the dimensions of success set out by Newman (2014), the programme seems to have had some level of success across most, if not all, of the dimensions.

Dimension	Outcome
Process	The scheme was implemented as per the announcement. The procurement process was successful—the ANAO identified that these processes were 'robust and transparent' (Auditor-General, 2012, p. 19). There were no significant policy deviations from when the scheme was first designed and considered by the Cabinet (Cullen, 2023).
Goal attainment	Clear objectives were set at the start of the programme, which were met. Around 330,000 households were successfully converted to digital TV (DBCDE, 2013), on time and on budget, with a complaints rate of less than 1.5% (Auditor-General, 2012).
Distributional outcomes	Provided support to poorer households. Middle-income and high-income households were excluded. However, the large cost raised questions about the opportunity cost, and whether there were better ways to spend these funds, particularly given the Commonwealth's budget deficit.
Political consequences	Mixed, and changed over time. Very well received by stakeholders, but media coverage was negative, leading to an ongoing taint on the programme.

The dimensions that were most contested were the political and distributional (cost-effectiveness). When the Mildura trial was announced in January 2009, the Opposition supported the general concept and supported the enabling legislation, but raised concerns about the eligibility; the cost (including suggestions of simply posting out an STB, or providing a voucher); and the risk of fraud (Commonwealth, 2009). This changed when additional funding was announced in the 2011 Budget. While the programme had already been running successfully for more than a year, without any deaths or injuries, the reception turned negative. By this stage, the pink batts scheme had already been terminated due to the four deaths. The perceived similarity between the schemes, along with an emboldened Opposition, led the media to jump on it, referring to it as a 'folly' (Albrechtsen, 2011), a 'nanny state handout' (Latham, 2011), 'the Budget's worst feature' (Atkins, 2011), and 'pink batts for pensioners' (Tauriello, 2011), and the Opposition called it 'a national joke' (Cassidy, 2011).

There was no doubt that HAS was expensive—across the whole programme, the government committed $381.4 million. There was a range of competing claims about the supposed unit cost of each installation, with claims that the programme could cost up to $698 per installation, compared to a 'basic set-top box [which] sells for $19 at Kmart' (Aikman & Cleary, 2012).

DBCDE invested a lot of time and energy working with stakeholders—in particular, representatives of disability groups. This resulted in carefully designed product and service requirements, specifically tailored to the needs of the client group. For example, the STB had to have the ability to support audio description and have changeable menu colours (a standard accessibility requirement). The instruction manual had to be provided in a variety of different formats to improve accessibility (including Braille and DAISY)[5]. The service provider was also required to use the Translating and Interpreting Service and the National Relay Service[6]. The most significant accessibility success was the introduction of 'talking' STB—which enabled people with a vision impairment to interact with menus and electronic programme guides, as the STB literally 'talked' what was on screen. This was welcomed by major stakeholders, including Vision Australia, the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, Blind Citizens Australia, and Media

Access Australia, who put out a joint announcement saying they were 'thrilled… This is a great example of government listening to [blind and vision impaired] advocates and getting a really good result for all Australians' (ACCAN, 2012)[7]. This reflected the commitment by DBCDE to working closely with external stakeholders (Junior-APS2, 2023; Townend, 2023). This could be seen as a case study in what the more recent Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme (Holmes AC SC, 2023, p. xiii) recommended that governments '[d]esign policies and processes with emphasis on the people they are meant to serve', including 'communication which is sensitive to the particular circumstances of the customer cohort, including… lack of access to technology [and] lack of digital literacy'.

The effort put into the design of the programme seems to have been successful, as customer feedback was positive. Pensioners reported that they were 'impressed with the professionalism' of the contractor, and others said 'You knew straight away these guys were professional' (Tauriello, 2011). Some customers wrote to the Minister to thank them for the programme:

> I had to write to say thank you to you….. It was installed without any fuss (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 34)

and

> I wish to convey my thanks for the professional and efficient way my television was converted to digital… I could not have afforded them [myself]. This is a government initiative that should be acknowledged and applauded. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 34)

By the end of the programme, the then-opposition spokesperson (Senator Birmingham) acknowledged the success of the overall switchover programme:

> Credit where it is due… the switchover task force has managed something which had the potential to be quite difficult, generally speaking, quite smoothly… it is a credit to the task force and the work with the industry and contractors. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013, pp. 36–37)

While Senator Birmingham's 'credit' focused on the 'goal attainment' dimension of success, when it comes to the 'political consequences' dimension, HAS is an example of the importance of the temporal aspect of policy evaluation (Compton & Hart, 2019). During its initial phase in Mildura and regional South Australia, the Opposition and media were broadly supportive of the programme but concerned about the cost (Jackson, 2010). After the deaths in the pink batts programme, and both the media and the Opposition smelt blood in the water, the political atmosphere changed. This has led to 'set-top boxes' becoming another shibboleth for the Labor government's perceived waste and incompetence. For years after HAS finished, the negative media coverage continued unabated, including calling the scheme a 'failure' (Mitchell, 2017), a 'boondoggle' (Australian, 2015), and a 'debacle' (Australian, 2014), while its cost were repeatedly criticised (Australian, 2013; Maher, 2014). As recently as March 2022 (almost 10 years since the programme finished), it was still being cited as an example of Labor's inability to govern (Kenny, 2022).

Almost all interviewees recalled the media being very hostile, looking for failures. This placed significant pressure on the public servants, who felt the pressure of working on a highly contested

programme. Junior-APS3 (2023) recalled 'we were made fun of… it's quite embarrassing… it's hard not to take it personally'. Another recalled:

> My own mother!… she knew I was working on it. And she said 'Oh well… It's a terrible thing, going into all those people's homes and risking fires!' And I said to her 'mum that that's nothing of the sort'. (McMahon, 2023)

The media coverage (which is a core component of the political consequences dimension of success) focused on value for money. It was a conflict over values, as the extended quote from McConnell (2010, p. 351), above, mentions—'only those who regard the original goal as desirable are likely to perceive' the achievements of these goals as 'success'. The argument advanced by the Opposition and the media was that the original goals (providing in-home assistance) were not desirable. As such, even having delivered the scheme on time, on budget, with minimal complaints, and with no deaths or serious injuries, the scheme could continue to be labelled a 'failure' in this dimension.

Turning now to the reasons for the (general) success of HAS. In the previous section, I demonstrated how the failings associated with HIP could be traced back to issues with institutional/policy process issues associated with the Rudd Cabinet and public service culture. These underlying risks, combined with timeline pressures and conflicting priorities, led to four specific issues that drove the failure of the pink batts programme. In this section, I examine these factors and how they played out differently for HAS.

Firstly, HAS was designed as a staged/phased rollout, starting with a pilot in Mildura (regional Victoria) in mid-2010, before moving across regional Australia, and ending with the large metropolitan areas at the end of 2013. Across these years, eight different tenders were released, with each tender amended based on lessons from previous regions, allowing improvements to products and service delivery. The ANAO identified this as a key strength of HAS[8]. Further, HAS was delivered through a head contractor model, much like the original intention of HIP, to ensure a higher level of control over all aspects of the service delivery process. These two core design choices both differ from choices made in the pink batt scheme and emerge as critical to each programme's failure and success. Unlike pink batts, HAS customers did not have any choice about either the product being installed or the installers themselves. This lack of consumer choice reflected the presumption that HAS customers needed technical assistance, which meant that they were unlikely to have the technical knowledge to make a choice themselves.

The second factor identified was installer/product regulation and training. There were significant similarities between the antenna and insulation installation sectors. Both were unregulated, with limited training opportunities. This created similar risks. To address this risk, DBCDE established the voluntary Antenna Installer Endorsement Scheme (AIES), which required the installers to demonstrate a certain level of industry-agreed standards (which was not part of the pink batt registration process). However, the initial HAS tender documentation did not focus on WH&S. The training requirements were that the individual either be endorsed under the government's AIES, 'have significant experience', or have the appropriate training. This meant that it was possible for installers to participate without any formal training, creating similar risks as pink batts. Instead, the focus was on customer safety and security—reflecting what were perceived as the major risks. This was because these decisions occurred before the first death on the pink batts scheme—the tender was released 4 months before the first pink batts death. As one interviewee recalled:

> as pink batts emerged, all of a sudden there was a risk around 'Ohh crap, what if one of our installers falls off a roof? I don't think we'd really thought that through as robustly in the early stages'. (Junior-APS3, 2023)

As the problems associated with pink batts became clearer, the political pressure increased—'there were some searching questions being asked of the Minister… "Are you going to kill somebody"'? (Townend, 2023). However, DBCDE worked closely with DEWHA to ensure they understood what went wrong with pink batts and how they could prevent it from happening within HAS (McMahon, 2023). However, others suggested that the hysteria meant that it was not possible 'to have an entirely rational discussion' about the issues (Pelling, 2023), perhaps resulting in an overreaction.

The response can be seen in the subsequent tender documentation, which shows that WH&S became an increasingly important factor from the third tender (regional Victoria), which was released in April 2010 (after all four pink batts deaths). From that point forward, evidence of WH&S capability and capacity became part of the tender evaluation criteria, and tenderers were required to provide information about WH&S procedures and training procedures. Additional WH&S requirements were subsequently added, including audit requirements; requirements to isolate electrical circuits whenever an installer was in the roof cavity; undertaking risk assessments when foil insulation was present; and requirements about asbestos training. Finally, consistent with the pink batts programme, an external quality assurance scheme was introduced, where a third party would undertake random live WH&S inspections. Nevertheless, there was some element of luck that no installer was seriously injured:

> someone was doing a compliance check, and I got a call and they're like 'the blokes on the roof without any safety equipment at all'. And I had to say, well, 'you'll have to suspend him and send him home'. So, and I'm like 'crap… that's someone's job'. (Junior-APS3, 2023)

The third factor was demand-side controls. This was another significant difference with the HAS, which had clearly defined eligibility, which created a cap on demand, but an unknown take-up rate. This was managed through the phased rollout and head contractor models. Households were invited to apply through a letter from Centrelink, the timing of which was controlled by DBCDE. The head contractors were given a significant time window to complete the installations, allowing them to manage their workforce and balance demand across areas.

The final factor was a lack of departmental skills and experience. This was another area where similar risks were apparent. Pelling (2023) noted that DBCDE was a small, policy-focused department with limited experience in programme management. This lack of skills and experience was also evident to Junior-APS3 (2023), who recalled that she was hired specifically for her programme delivery and management experience in Centrelink. Junior-APS3 initially worked for me, and soon after Junior-APS3 was hired, they asked me a series of detailed questions about how the programme was going to be rolled out. I responded, 'I don't know, and what's more I wouldn't have even thought of those questions—that is why we hired you'. While there was a skills gap within DBCDE, it was a known gap that was being actively addressed.

Throughout the interviews, there was an overwhelming sense that HAS had been successful. Despite the adverse media coverage, Junior-APS3 (2023) reflected 'am I proud of the work? Yeah!' However, a more interesting story revealed itself when interviewees were asked to reflect on their implicit definition of 'success'. For some, the primary basis was to compare the outcomes to the

announced objectives—'We set some objectives. We set a timeline. We set a budget' (Townend, 2023), and others focused on risk/fraud (Cullen, 2023; McMahon, 2023). These can clearly be related back to the 'process' and 'goal attainment' dimensions of success discussed above. Others focused on the perspectives of the customer and the media (Junior-APS1, 2023), which tie more closely to the 'political consequences' dimension. Finally, others had a clear normative perspective 'have we improved the lives of people we were setting out to help'? (Dawson, 2023), which relates back to the 'distributional outcomes' dimension.

Both Junior-APS3 (2023) and Townend (2023) also expressed concern about the issue of additionality and the associated deadweight loss—had we not done that, would it have made any difference'? Townend (2023) suggested that political decisions meant that HAS over-serviced because the additional cost was necessary to (as far as possible) negate the risk of people's TVs not working—which was a major political risk, especially given the hostile media environment. Interestingly, this feeling trickled down to the more junior public servants, with Junior-APS1 (2023) reflecting 'risk management was more important than value for money'. Townend (2023) concluded:

> So, if you were saying 'was digital switchover a success'? Yes, because it met the stated objectives. Could it have been done cheaper? Absolutely, yes, but political decisions were taken… where the cost/benefit analysis was not as good as it could have been.

This appears to have created a vicious 'political consequences' circle. Given the political atmosphere at the time, where any misstep, error, or mistake was seen as another nail in the coffin of the Labor government, the government was willing to throw money at problems to reduce risks. This, in turn, allowed the media and Opposition to accuse the government of wasting money.

6 | COMPARATIVE LESSONS

This article has explored the success and failure of the HIP (colloquially known as 'pink batts') and the Digital Switchover HAS. Both programs were perceived negatively and received significant adverse media coverage. This article agrees that while pink batts was a failure, it argues that the HAS was a success across most of the dimensions of success theorised by Newman (2014), with the only mixed result being the 'political consequences'.

I argued that four specific issues drove the failure of the pink batts programme—scheme design; installer/product regulation and training; failure to limit/control demand; and lack of departmental skill. All of these came back to the timeline pressures, driven by conflicting priorities, which in turn gave PM&C more influence than would usually be the case. HAS, on the other hand, had a lot less interference from PM&C and other central agencies. This helped to ensure that two key design choices were made that helped ensure that similar problems did not arise. These choices, however, were not necessarily generalisable 'lessons' from pink batts. Rather, the nature of the problem to be addressed and the different political environments were sufficiently different, leading to different design choices. HAS required that the government have assurance that particular individuals had received particular services by a particular date—otherwise pensioners' TVs would cease working, which was regarded as politically unacceptable. Importantly, the 'particular date' varied across the country, due to infrastructure constraints imposed by broadcasters and other parts of government. This necessitated a phased rollout and a command-and-control style of programme management, which was best achieved through a head contractor model. The exter-

nal limitations helped ensure these design choices were made, and this turned out to be crucial to the success of the programme.

Pink batts was very different. While DEWHA argued for a phased, region-by-region rollout, as noted above, they were unsuccessful. In part, this was because of the overriding stimulus objective, but also because there was no external driver requiring such a staged rollout. Secondly, the pink batts scheme did not necessarily care which individuals received services or whether it was by a particular date. It did not matter to the scheme if certain people opted in or did not. From both the environmental objective and the stimulus objective, each roof was fungible. Nor were there any adverse consequences if those people received their services on a particular date or 2 weeks later.

What lessons can be drawn from this comparative study that would be useful for future policy development processes? I turn now to the McConnell (2018) narrative frames. Firstly, the institutional and policy process frame. Many of the same institutional and policy process issues were present for both HIP and HAS. Both programs were developed under the same chaotic Cabinet processes, so what led to the different outcomes? For HIP, the decision-making was rushed and disjointed, without any proper policy development process underpinning the programme. For HAS, Cabinet decision-making was clunky, indecisive, and slow. McMahon (2023) recalls that Cabinet (or its committees) considered HAS eight different times, 'and each time we went up [to Cabinet] we were asked to recut it, remodel it, bring more and more information'. These poor policy processes could have resulted in equally poor policy decisions. However, within DBCDE, the internal policy development process had been careful, deliberate, and thorough, which was recognised by the Auditor-General (2012, p. 20) who found that '[t]he department undertook considerable preparation work to plan and design HAS throughout 2008, prior to formal approval by the Government'. This internal work appears to have offset part of the risks associated with poor Cabinet processes.

Another key difference was in the public service leadership, which feeds into both the individual actor and institutional frames. The HIP was designed and implemented by career public servants, who may have become acculturated to the 'don't tell the Minister' culture—one senior public servant gave evidence to the Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program (2014, p. 27) that 'he didn't feel it was his place to disagree with the time line'. On the other hand, the head of the Digital Switchover Taskforce, Mr Andy Townend, had come to Australia from the United Kingdom specifically to manage the digital TV transition. He came with strong technical knowledge, and (but?) without the APS cultural baggage. The author recalls that, at the time, Mr Townend's lack of APS experience was regarded as a negative. He did not understand the APS 'tradecraft' and was 'too' focused on external stakeholders, rather than responding to the Minister. Mr Townend reflected that the UK public service was more 'politically independent' and gave more 'robust' advice than their Australian counterparts. Given that Mr Townend had no Australian public service career ambitions (after Australia, he went to Serbia and then Ghana and Nigeria to oversee their digital switchovers), this may have led him to be more strident in his advice than his counterparts on the HIP. In retrospect, this appears to have offset part of the risks associated with the APS culture.

Another comparative lesson is the danger of central agencies having too much weight in the policy-making process, as they seek to achieve their ministers' political objectives, often at the expense of the subject-matter and service-delivery experts in line agencies. As the Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program (2014, p. 306) noted, central agencies' value 'is undone when PM&C itself pushes a particular agenda at all costs and without having any detailed knowledge of the programme or project'. In the HAS, the preferred policy position of the policy agency (DBCDE) won out against the recommendations of central agencies. The reason for this is unclear

from the evidence and raises an important further research question—in what circumstances do central agencies' positions win out over line agencies?

The final, and unfortunately ongoing, issue is the question of APS culture and the importance of robust policy processes. It seems that the lessons from the pink batts Royal Commission have not been sufficiently embedded in APS culture (Casey & Maley, 2024), as many of the recommendations of the more recent Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme (Holmes AC SC, 2023) have clear echoes, particularly in relation to public servants succumbing to a 'don't tell the minister' culture, in order to achieve a politically expedient outcome.

In conclusion, the problems associated with poor institutional culture, poor policy and Cabinet processes, and problematic leadership (McConnell, 2018) created risks across all programs. However, as with all risks, whether the risks result in problems depends partially on chance and partially on how effectively the risk can be managed and mitigated. The GFC created a situation that exacerbated the risks and removed pre-established risk mitigations within the policy process. Slightly different circumstances (including some serendipity) for HAS meant that these cultural and processual risks could be managed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author was involved in the initial design and implementation of the Household Assistance Scheme when he worked for the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The responses to my FOI requests are included in the Supporting Information.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program (2014) estimated that the total workforce on HIP was over 12,000, and the Auditor-General (2012) reported that there were several hundred subcontractors for HAS.

[2] Australian Government, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, and the Arts. FOI Reference 24-098. These are available in the Supporting Information.

[3] The author requested documents that he wrote himself, or were referenced by the Auditor-General (2012). However, the FOI requests were denied because '[n]o documents matching the description in your request could be located…'.

[4] Ethics approval was granted by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (2023/190), and informed consent was received by providing a Participant Information Sheet ahead of time and obtaining a signed consent form. No significant ethics risks emerged during the research.

[5] The Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY), an internationally recognised text-to-speech format.

[6] The National Relay Service is an Australia-wide phone service for people who are deaf or have hearing or speech impediments.

[7] This continues to be the one of the author's proudest achievements of his public service career.

[8] Apart from this routine ANAO report, routine Senate Estimates questioning, and routine Senate legislation committee hearings, there were no other inquiries into the HAS.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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