THE GARBAGE CAN MODEL

Evidently, the so-called garbage can model was intended as a way to represent organizational choice more realistically than the rational decision model, which was originally developed for individual choice behaviour. Like the rational decision model its theoretical simplicity is attractive: (1) the value function is ambiguous; (2) knowledge about
the choice situation is uncertain; (3) decision rules are complex and symbolic (Cohen et al., 1972).

The garbage can model has been applied to decision-making in various types of organizations, and it is no exaggeration to suggest that its appeal has been most obvious in governmental-type organization (March and Olsen, 1976; Cohen and March, 1974; Clark, 1983; Olsen, 1983). The literature on so-called policy styles could be seen as an extension of the garbage can model (Richardson, 1982).

In relation to the evaluation criteria its degree of empirical confirmation is not the major problem. Undoubtedly there are sets of data about policy-making that satisfy the garbage can model as public decision-making often appears characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty and political symbolism.

The degree of empirical support is an issue of contention as the garbage can model over-emphasizes the irrational components of organizational behaviour, even in relation to its most typical empirical case – university decision-making (Trow, 1984). Its most serious weakness, however, is its lack of deductive power.

The rational decision model is undoubtedly very strong if judged by the criterion of deductive power. The problem with its suggested replacement – the garbage can model – is that it is far from obvious what its implications are. What can we deduce about organizational behaviour from these assumptions about value ambiguity, technology uncertainty and political ritualism?

If the rational decision model suffers from too much theoretical content, then certainly the garbage can model places too high a value upon descriptive realism. To state that organizational choice is irrational, that solutions look for problems instead of the other way around, that budget-making is ritualism and that technology is foolishness operates effectively as a critique of the rational choice model but it also demonstrates its strictly limited applicability.

However, as a behaviour theory on its own terms the garbage can model appears to raise as many questions as it answers. We may wish to know if rational organizational behaviour is ever feasible or even desirable, if it is impossible as the garbage can model seems to imply. Moreover, it is far from obvious that reality only contains two alternatives: rational behaviour or irrational behaviour. It may well be the case that organizations acting under the rationality assumption satisfy some other decision model which does not contain such strong assumptions as the rational decision model whilst also by-passing the amorphous nature of policy-making implied by the garbage can model.

Public policy-making bodies do have goals tied to their programmes and the emphasis on evaluation and implementation implies that programmes may find their outcomes, though the decision-making may fall far short of the requirements of the rational decision model. It is easy to point out the imprecise and vague nature of many goals
in public policy-making – attention has often been called to the lack of technologies in the public sector (Rose, 1981) – and it is not difficult to find processes of policy-making that are orientated more towards the avoidance of a decision than the making of one, or that simply confirm by ritual action what has been decided elsewhere or not decided at all.

However, how do we identify when the goal function is more or less vague and imprecise, when the technology is more or less uncertain, and when political symbolism occurs together with real decision-making? Again, if systematic criteria are devised that allow us to classify choice situations as more or less rational then it turns out that the garbage can model covers an extreme case of decision-making as the polar opposite of rational decision-making.

If any deviation from the stringent requirement of the rational decision model means that the data satisfy the garbage can model, then it would indeed have a large coverage. If, on the other, its field of application is much more limited, then we will certainly be interested in knowing more about the many choice situations between rationality and irrationality.

The garbage can model raises some puzzling problems about the practical usefulness of theories modelling public sector decision-making. The rational decision model has a long standing as a useful tool for solving problems in the public sector. Actually, the adherents of planning, programming and budgeting (PPB) modelled public sector funding on the image of a comprehensive rational decision model (Novick, 1965, 1973), thus seriously overstating the case for rationality in organizations (Wildavsky, 1986).

Yet, it seems as if the practical conclusions of the garbage can model are none at best and useless at worst. If organizational choice is ambiguity and foolishness, then how do we change decision-making in the public sector? Is the garbage can model true of segments of the public sector at different time slices? If so, then we need additional criteria that will allow us to understand when and why some organizations or organizational behaviour is pathological (Hogwood and Peters, 1985).

To sum up: the garbage can model scores high on model simplicity but is weak in terms of deductive power and falsifiability. Its degree of empirical confirmation is contested whereas its practical usefulness is not obvious.