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Ideas beyond paradigms: relative commensurability and the case of Canadian trade-industrial policy, 1975–95

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ABSTRACT In light of recent interest in the theoretical foundations of policy paradigms, this paper aims to specify the qualities that differentiate paradigmatic from non-paradigmatic policy ideas. While the incommensurability thesis that underlies the concept of paradigms has been the target of much criticism, there is something intuitively appealing about the incommensurability of policy alternatives that is not yet fully understood. Hesitant to abandon completely the notion of incommensurability, this paper emphasizes the relative nature of ideational commensurability and provides an account of how the exclusivity of a paradigm may wither in relation to competing perspectives. The empirical section demonstrates this pattern of paradigmatic policy-making by examining solutions advanced to alleviate problems in Canadian trade-industrial policy between 1975 and 1995. Contrary to the popular perception that paradigmatic ideas yield policy stability, the findings suggest that even in areas where clearly articulated paradigms initially exist, strictly paradigmatic thinking is often fleeting.

KEY WORDS Bricolage; free trade; ideas; incommensurability; paradigms; trade-industrial policy

INTRODUCTION

More than 20 years after Jane Jenson and Peter Hall developed the concept, policy paradigms continue to attract the attention of social scientists (Hall 1990, 1993; Jenson 1989).[1] Despite renewed interest in the theoretical foundations of policy paradigms, issues have gone unresolved concerning whether policy scholars ought to accept or reject the incommensurability thesis that underlies the concept (Schmidt 2011). Owing to such disagreement, interested parties have tended to gravitate toward either a hard or soft conception of paradigms and paradigmatic change, with those in the former group defending the notion of paradigmatic incommensurability while those in the latter dismiss the incommensurability thesis as little more than an obfuscating metaphor (Daigneault 2014; Princen and 't Hart 2014).

It is doubtless that there is something intuitively appealing about the incommensurability of policy alternatives, yet careful analysis has often revealed the appearance of such qualities to be illusory (Coleman *et al.* 1996; Crouch and Keune 2005; Kay 2007). This paper aims to reconcile these perspectives by emphasizing that paradigmatic incommensurability is relative. That is, incommensurability requires an appreciation among policy actors that two or more alternatives possess qualities of incommensurability, which is a perception that is subject to change.

Defining paradigmatic ideas as those that provide a framework for instrumental action (Kuhn 1970a), this discussion makes several observations about the influence paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic ideas have on policy-making. Analysis of the evolution of ideas surrounding trade-industrial policy during a period of transformative change in Canada reveals that paradigmatic ideas do not always become entrenched either in the minds of actors or in established policies. Rather, paradigmatic ideas may exist initially in predominantly academic or otherwise abstract debates, but as the dynamic of policy-making shifts from agenda setting to formulation, and then to implementation and reformulation, the paradigmatic purity of policy ideas is often compromised as incommensurability among alternatives is eroded (Thomas 2001).

Three phenomena are theorized to contribute to this erosion: (1) the 'recombination' or 'coupling' of sometimes disparate policy programmes during agenda setting (Kingdon 1984); (2) the mediation or authoritative brokerage of solutions when actors' core beliefs are resistant to compromise (Sabatier 1988; Schön and Rein 1994); and (3) the pragmatic 'marginal value adjustments' that ensue as policy-makers confront unexpected problems (Lindblom 1979). Taken together, these observations suggest that 'ideational bricolage' is more pervasive in both theory and practice than is often recognized (Campbell 1997; Carstensen 2011a).

As is made clear by the case evidence, incommensurable policy paradigms can and often do exist. Researchers should take care however not to confuse paradigmatic ideas as abstract ideal-types with the actionable ideas of agents engaged in the practice of policy-making. The central argument made in this paper is that, rather than being emblematic of ideational and institutional stability, the paradigmatic purity of both policy ideas and the policy solutions that follow from them is often fleeting, first as theoretical concepts are translated into policy proposals and, second, as policies confront the challenges of implementation. In other words, policy-making is not predominantly based on attempts to adhere to textbook approaches, but is rather characterized by efforts to cope with real-world political and administrative challenges by working with ideas beyond paradigms. The concluding section returns to the implications of this discussion for ideational theorizing.

PARADIGMS AND THE DYNAMICS OF PARADIGMATIC INCOMMENSURABILITY

Although the concept of paradigms had been popular among social scientists since the 1940s,[2] Hall's 1993 article 'Policy paradigms, social learning, and

the state' has been by far the most influential treatment of paradigms, if not ideas, from a public policy perspective (Hall 1993). According to Daigneault (2014: 461), policy paradigms possess four mutually reinforcing dimensions, the identification of which signals to researchers that a policy area is governed by a paradigm. These are: (1) 'values, assumptions and principles about the nature of reality, social justice and the appropriate role of the State'; (2) 'a conception of the problem that requires public intervention'; (3) 'ideas about which policy ends and objectives should be pursued'; and (4) 'ideas about appropriate policy "means" to achieve those ends'. A paradigm is influential, argues Hall (1993: 279), 'because so much of it is taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny as a whole'. This is because paradigms are bound only by their own rules. They provide a framework (or 'matrix') within which rational behaviour is defined by outlining or clarifying the relationships between unobservable, non-empirical 'metaphysical' assumptions and instrumental action (Kuhn 1970a; Masterman 1970; *cf.* Blyth 2003).

Paradigms change, therefore, when they are threatened by the appearance of anomalies, namely 'developments that are not fully comprehensible, even as puzzles, within the terms of the paradigm' (Hall 1993: 280). In the presence of anomalies, practitioners engage in ad hoc attempts to rescue the paradigm by stretching its interpretive framework, undermining in the process its intellectual coherence, which in turn may cast doubt on the accuracy with which the paradigm explains reality. As anomalies and doubt increase in number and severity, a paradigmatic crisis erupts, often leading to an intellectual revolution within its community of adherents. While the adoption of a new paradigm is by and large a leap of faith, the test of whether a failing paradigm will be overthrown depends critically on whether a contending paradigm is able to both explain and resolve anomalies considered to be incomprehensible under the previous paradigm (see Kuhn 1962: 156–7).

A proper appreciation of Hall's adaptation of the paradigms concept to public policy requires recognition that it is a synthesis of Kuhn's (1962) ideas on the historical development of the natural sciences and Bateson's (1972) on 'orders of learning', the latter of which were applied to the organizational contexts Hall was interested in by Argyris and Schön (1978). That is, in making Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions amenable to the study of public policy, Hall (1990, 1993) added analytical precision to understanding how practitioners reflect on their methods by disaggregating social learning into three 'orders' bearing a direct correspondence with three types of policy change. As such, Hall (1993: 278) argued that a disaggregated understanding of social learning should lead one to think about the relationship between ideas, learning and policy change as involving: a 'third order' related to the overarching goals that guide policy in a particular field, a 'second order' related to the techniques or policy instruments used to attain those goals, and a 'first order' having to do with the precise settings of those instruments.

It should be emphasized that Hall's orders of learning exist in a strict hierarchy, with ideas in each order governed by ideas that exist at higher levels of

abstraction. That is, ideas held at the third order govern the range of appropriate action at the second order and so forth down the hierarchy. How and why this is the case hinges on incommensurability, which I argue to be foundational to Hall's understanding of policy paradigms.

The incommensurability thesis and social scientific paradigms

A subject of much controversy, the ongoing debate on the incommensurability thesis has arguably spawned more confusion than enlightenment, resulting in its meaning, implications and importance being understated, overemphasized and misinterpreted by both philosophers of science and social scientists eager to adapt the concept (Hassard 1988; Masterman 1970). Contrary to Bird (2012), I see no way around viewing incommensurability as an integral element of Kuhn's original theory. Still, this does not mean that incommensurability is as rigid a concept as some of Kuhn's critics had charged (see Kuhn 1970b).

In the first edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn outlined his incommensurability thesis the following way:

> The proponents of competing paradigms are always at least slightly at cross-purposes. Neither side will grant all the *non-empirical assumptions* that the other needs in order to make its case ... they are bound to partly talk through each other. Though each may hope to convert the other to his way of seeing his science and his problems, neither may hope to prove his case. The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved by proofs. (Kuhn 1962: 147; emphasis added)

In the same passage, Kuhn qualifies what he means by incommensurability, as well as the extent to which it matters, by noting (a) that new paradigms are 'born from old ones', incorporating along the way 'much of the vocabulary and apparatus, both conceptual and manipulative' of the old paradigm, and (b) that two paradigms 'seldom employ these borrowed elements in quite the traditional way'; thus, 'communication across the revolutionary divide is inevitably partial' (Kuhn 1962: 148).

It is therefore not necessarily the case that advocates of competing paradigms cannot agree on which empirical observations are important – although both Kuhn and Hall point out that this is often a symptom of a deeper disagreement – but rather that they cannot agree on the *non-empirical assumptions* that make their theories hang together causally. Put differently, disagreement stems from differences that exist at the 'metaphysical' level, but differences that nevertheless organize the elements in the 'belt of auxiliary hypotheses' that surround a research programme's 'hard core' (Lakatos 1968: 169). Unfortunately, recourse to Hanson's (1958) gestalt metaphor, along with a preoccupation with language, probably served more to distort than clarify the ideas Kuhn (and, subsequently, Hall) hoped to convey by encouraging the false assumption that elements of one paradigm, even if they did not appear to change, played such a different role in another that they were unrecognizable. Great efforts were

consequently devoted to demonstrating what Kuhn had argued from the beginning: that rival paradigms may have a great deal in common with one another (Field 1973; Kordig 1973).

It should be no surprise that the same debate that took place in the philosophy of science in the 1970s was reproduced in the policy literature. However, unlike the literature on paradigms in organizational theory (Hassard 1988), reflection on the incommensurability thesis by policy scholars has been of rather recent vintage, with much of this work tending to deny, either explicitly or implicitly, the appropriateness of the thesis to policy studies (Béland and Cox 2013; Carstensen 2011a; Daigneault 2014; Schmidt 2011; Wilder and Howlett 2014).

Others still have held that incommensurability is indispensable to the idea of paradigms (Princen and 't Hart 2014). Blyth (2013), in particular, demonstrates the concept's usefulness for bridging rational choice and constructivist interpretations of the policy process by suggesting that paradigmatic ideas provide a road map for rational action at the instrumental level. In Blyth's (2013: 210–11) words, Hall's 'third order is autonomous, and it is the incommensurate nature of rival claims that matters most of all', though it should be emphasized that this does not mean that it is the incommensurability of goals that matters, but rather the incommensurability of causal claims that logically connect all three of Hall's orders.[3] So while 'first order' and 'second order' learning may be thought of as Bayesian updating under a given disciplinary matrix, learning at the third order occurs 'sociologically' – that is, outside the scope of rational action – precisely because what counts as rational behaviour is in the process of being redefined.[4]

That all said, even in instances where actors have clear ideas about how to achieve objectives, it is no secret that in the real world of policy-making a lot can happen to obscure or alter the means by which interests may be realized (Scharpf 1997). I do not want to give the impression that policy behaviour in such instances is irrational.[5] Rather, it ceases to be paradigmatic as the incommensurability that divides abstract theories gives way to the demands of real-world policy-making. While actors in these situations may still be guided by paradigmatic ideas, doing the best they can to adhere to a given paradigm, situations such as these amount to at least some loss of control over what Baumgartner and Jones (1993) call the policy image. As a result, the tidy logics of technical policy-making are made vulnerable to repurposing and repackaging by skilful entrepreneurs turned 'bricoleurs', who are often motivated to steer policy in directions not originally intended (Carstensen 2011a; Cox and Béland 2013; Kingdon 1984).

Relative commensurability in theory and practice

The relative nature of paradigmatic incommensurability and its association to policy bricolage is well documented in the policy literature, but has oddly not been acknowledged as such. Developed originally by Campbell ([1997]; but

see also Sanger and Levin [1992]), Carstensen's (2011a) repopularization of bricolage was intended to differentiate 'paradigm man' from 'the bricoleur' as competing theories of agency. Put simply, since bricolage implies 'tinkering' with policy solutions based on available means, Carstensen (2011a) observed that the bricoleur shared affinities with Kingdon's (1984) policy entrepreneur and Lindblom's (1959) 'muddling' analyst.

I would like to argue that it is not the case that most actors are born bricoleurs, nor is it that no 'paradigm men' exist, but that the differences between these supposedly competing images of policy-making disappear if we recognize that actors who may be adherents of paradigmatic ideas are often forced to become bricoleurs in the course of policy-making. This requires acknowledgement that the commensurability of policy ideas is relative in two senses. First, incommensurability must be recognized as such by actors, who may in fact disagree about the extent to which two (or more) policy ideas are incompatible. Second, a policy can only be incommensurable in its relation to alternatives, which are themselves the subjects of ongoing articulation.

Policy ideas may not, however, be combined in an infinite number of ways. Rendering previously incommensurable ideas compatible requires considerable skill, both in terms of finding ways to create a new policy logic (i.e., a new causal understanding of the world) and in terms of convincing other actors that investing in such a policy direction will be worthwhile. Existing theory suggests that occasions to execute the latter task – achieving the political consent required to go forward on a policy – are not ongoing, but are dependent upon the presence of windows of opportunity that allow for the combination of previously competing perspectives (Kingdon 1984). The arrival of such windows is theorized to be equal parts cognitive and political, which makes the exercise of bricolage both highly interpretive and closely associated with bargaining (Carstensen 2011b).

For example, frustration over policy stasis is theorized by Kingdon (1984) to contribute to the softening of previously recalcitrant positions, making them amenable to recombination for purposes of achieving access to the political agenda. Similarly, Baumgartner and Jones (1993), citing Schattschneider's ideas on the mobilization of bias, argue that image monopolies are destroyed and recreated over the course of the conflict expansion necessary to build a critical mass of political support to either challenge or maintain an existing image monopoly. Here, appealing to the interests of the previously apathetic is central to the theory, which necessarily involves stretching the policy image or paradigm (Mondou *et al.* 2014).

Looking beyond the policy agenda, Sabatier (1988) argued that actors will organize around shared 'core' causal assumptions about how a policy area works. Analogous to the argument put forward by Kuhn and Hall, Sabatier (1988: 155) observed that 'when two cores conflict ... the tendency is for each coalition to talk past the other and thus for a "dialogue of the deaf" to persist until external conditions dramatically alter the power balance within the subsystem'. Importantly, Sabatier contended that this 'dialogue of the

deaf' does not inevitably result in wholesale revolutions. Instead, core aspects of one policy image may be incorporated into the 'secondary aspects' of another, presumably for the sake of winning over or otherwise placating opponents. Compromises may also be mediated between obstinate coalitions by authoritative brokers, which may result in image amalgamation or the forging of an understanding that is entirely new (Schön and Rein 1994). Consequently, resultant experiments oftentimes fare poorly in practice due to inconsistencies in the policy's logic that were initially overlooked for the sake of political considerations (Kern and Howlett 2009).

Thus, while agenda setting dynamics serve to obscure the interpretive frameworks embedded within policy proposals, formulation, implementation and reformulation also threaten their ideational purity. Lindblom (1959) long ago argued that the administration of public policy was much more suited to the 'branch method' than it was the 'root method'. Contending that the latter often leans heavily on theory while the former does not, Lindblom hypothesized that the incremental tweaking of policy often occurs with little attention paid to abstract goals or overarching values. Lindblom's (1979) notion of marginal value adjustments within a framework of 'disjointed incrementalism' is particularly pertinent to this discussion, as it suggests that policy-makers will rely disproportionately on policy ideas and policy solutions that are familiar to them, with institutional and administrative legacies dictating that administrators reach neither into the realm of the new nor necessarily into the realm of the consistent or commensurable to solve problems (Capano 2003). Granted, we might expect that the availability of a guiding paradigm would dissuade administrators from adopting the branch method. This view is however made problematic by the fact that even policy paradigms that survive agenda setting and policy formulation are often incompletely institutionalized and/or produce anomalies almost immediately upon implementation (Oliver and Pemberton 2004).

To summarize, even in instances in which paradigmatic policy ideas are strong, policy-makers engage in bricolage for two reasons. The first relates to the fact that the total institutionalization of a new policy paradigm is rare due to the technical, economic and political infeasibility of putting into practice a policy solution that is completely free from compromise (Hall 1989; Kingdon 1984; Lindblom 1959). Second, even when a new policy solution is successfully institutionalized, anomalous developments thereafter make ideational 'patching' necessary. As Lindblom (1979) points out, it may be necessary that this patching cross the lines of incommensurability that exist between what are believed to be paradigmatically exclusive alternatives, a phenomenon since described by Kay (2007) as 'tense layering'.

Accordingly, the following section will demonstrate how the boundaries of incommensurability that distinguish policy paradigms were upset over the course of a transformative moment in Canadian economic history. Far from being a case of paradigm replacement, the failure to properly institutionalize any one paradigmatic alternative over the others invited a muddle of three

once-distinct policy solutions, each of which had its ideational origins in a well-articulated paradigm.

IDEAS AND CANADIAN TRADE-INDUSTRIAL POLICY, 1975–95

While it may be the case that paradigmatic ideas are not prevalent in most policy areas, trade-industrial policy has been deemed an area especially suited for testing the paradigm change hypothesis (Campbell 1998; Princen and 't Hart 2014). In Canada, the notion that a paradigmatic shift marked the transition from Keynesianism to continental free trade is characteristic of much of the literature (Bradford 2000; McBride 2005). Considering the economic nationalism that defined the two Liberal administrations of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (1968–79, 1980–84), there can be little doubt that the period from 1975 to 1995 was one of substantial change in terms of both what policy ideas were dominant and what policy programmes were ultimately pursued. The question this analysis addresses is whether these ideas qualified as paradigmatic to begin with and whether the subsequent policy change can be accurately labelled as paradigmatic change.

Setting the agenda: economic ideas, 1975–85

Canadian debates concerning the virtues of free trade and state-led development date back to the 19th century. By the early 1970s, having failed to institutionalize a coherent post-war framework for state-led industrial development, duelling perspectives on economic policy began to resurface both within the state and without (Bradford 2000). For instance, as early as 1975, the state-affiliated Economic Council of Canada (ECC) began to advocate greater liberalization as a possible solution to problems of poor productivity (Economic Council of Canada 1975). In the legislative branch, between 1975 and 1982, the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs published a three-volume report advocating the careful examination of continental free trade as a policy option. In the private sphere, the Business Council on National Issues (BCNI) was formed in 1976 in response to restrictive foreign investment policies and began to lobby government for more market-oriented economic policies.

Meanwhile, the most powerful voice in favour of continued experimentation with state intervention came from the Science Council of Canada, an arm's length research organization whose mandate was to advise government on policy related to industry and technology. Rather than advocate discredited *dirigiste* policies, however, the Science Council subtly began to advocate a targeted or sector-specific North American trade regime in 1978, thereby making its ideas on 'liberal industrial policy' (LIP) partially amenable to what would become two paradigmatic extremes (Britton et al. 1978: 174–5). These were the statist approach, defined by ideas revolving around a national economic

strategy (NES), and the market-oriented approach that stressed comprehensive free trade (CFT).

The agenda for transformative policy change was formally set when the Trudeau government convened a Royal Commission in November of 1982 to assess the structure and performance of the Canadian economy. The Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, better known as the Macdonald Commission, invited hundreds of submissions from experts and academics in the interest of forging a coherent recommendation in its 1985 report. It is within the research materials that three distinct paradigmatic alternatives became delineable.

What I will call the national economic strategy (NES) paradigm was defined by the maintenance of the Keynesian goal of full employment, but shared an industrial policy orientation with the liberal industrial policy (LIP) paradigm as advocated by the Science Council (Hill and Whalley 1985). Although both approaches advocated the use of industrial policy instruments as policy means, important differences existed between them. The NES paradigm, while also focusing on the need for Canadian industry to stake out high-technology niches, favoured generous subsidies as well as some tariff protection to maintain employment in large but inefficient sunset industries (Harris and Cox 1984). For its part, the LIP paradigm was guided by a goal of economic rationalization and was geared toward transforming, with state assistance, the structure of the Canadian manufacturing sector (Jenkin 1983). The LIP approach was therefore much more interested in carefully picking a select number of winners (sunrise industries) than propping up a swath of would-be losers (Steed 1982). Crucially, part of this LIP strategy was a targeted approach to continental free trade, which, it was hypothesized, would bolster through the discipline of the market sectors in which Canadian industry possessed a comparative advantage, while sheltering with the help of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) those in which it did not.

A third paradigmatic alternative, though one that did not become dominant until a year prior to the release of the Macdonald Commission report in the summer of 1985, was to pursue comprehensive free trade (CFT) with the United States. Similar to LIP, the interpretive framework underlying CFT emphasized economic rationalization as a policy goal but viewed NTBs as deleterious to the success of this policy. In other words, LIP and CFT aligned at the level of policy ends, but advocated incommensurable policy means since NTBs were considered to do different things under each disciplinary matrix.

It was not until 1984 that Daigneault's criteria (discussed earlier) for identifying policy paradigms were satisfied. While the merits and demerits of free trade and protectionism had been debated for a century, assumptions about 'the nature of reality' did not coalesce with precise ideas about the appropriate role of the state until the Keynesian consensus began to unravel in the late 1970s. Yet, even when there was agreement that the Canadian economy faced a crisis that required intervention, ideas about virtues of market discipline were not confined to a single exclusive paradigm. Rather, many influential

groups subscribed to an interpretive framework that maintained an important role for the state in managing trade-industrial policy. Paradoxically, it was only as ideas about liberal industrial policy became more refined, leaving at the extremes more recalcitrant ideas and their adherents, that the last criteria for identifying policy paradigms – the forging of ideas about policy ends and the appropriate means to achieve them – were fulfilled. Until that point, it would be inappropriate to qualify ideas about trade-industrial policy as paradigmatic since the ideas underpinning the post-war General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) framework were amenable to both protectionism and trade liberalization. After this point we may define the three competing alternatives as paradigmatic since they promoted clear and incommensurable policy logics linking policy ends (full employment or market rationalization) with policy means (protectionist measures or sweeping liberalization).

The existence of policy paradigms alone does not, however, explain paradigm change. Explaining transformative change requires rather a focus on two separate processes beyond the articulation of policy ideas. These are (1) selection among policy alternatives, which might involve mediation; and (2) the subsequent institutionalization of policy solutions, which might be characterized by bricolage or layering over old solutions. The next sections examine these remaining questions.

Policy formulation and the role of change agents

Notwithstanding popular belief (Cameron and Drache 1985; Simeon 1987), I have found little evidence to sustain the view that most professional economists advocated comprehensive free trade (*cf.* Wonnacott and Wonnacott 1982). On the contrary, a careful reading of the research contributions to the Macdonald Commission reveals that prominent and influential economists tended to subscribe instead to the LIP paradigm (Chant 2005; Harris 1985). It was rather trade specialists and legal experts who most forcefully argued in favour of CFT (Hart 1985; Hill and Whalley 1985; Quinn 1986).

What appears to have been a crucial factor contributing to the popularity of CFT *vis-à-vis* LIP was the failure of attempts to negotiate a targeted free trade regime that took place over the course of the commission's research (see Canada 1983). While the commission said little about the intractability of LIP, it was no secret that the failure of trade talks in 1983–84 disillusioned stakeholders as to the viability of LIP (Hufbauer and Samet 1985). As a consequence, in spite of the affinities between LIP and CFT, policy core beliefs began to crystallize in 1984 around the logic of CFT, culminating in its espousal by the BCNI, the Canadian Manufacturers Association, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Exporters Association and the Department of External Affairs (Frazee and D'Aquino 1983; Kelleher 1985).

That trade talks under an LIP framework amounted to little does not however explain the rise of CFT as a set of viable policy ideas. Rather, having been convinced by the ideas of trade specialists and legal experts that an

all-or-nothing approach to free trade was the only way to prohibit parties from erecting harmful NTBs, the Macdonald Commission came down in support of the ideas behind comprehensive free trade in its final report (Canada 1985a: vol. I 303–5). Beyond this, the commission rejected the Keynesian goal of full employment as espoused by the NES paradigm in favour of the monetarist principle of the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment (NAIRU), which theorized that when unemployment stood below a certain natural rate, inflation would accelerate (Riddell 1986). A stable rate of unemployment between 6 and 8 per cent was therefore justified by the commission as per the NAIRU principle (Canada 1985a: vol. II 276).

In light of experience and armed with an ideationally cogent alternative, the Mulroney Progressive Conservative government, which had been elected into power in September of 1984, announced its adherence to the CFT paradigm in December of 1985 (Canada 1985b). Government adherence to paradigmatic ideas is however still a far cry from the institutionalization of a new policy paradigm. In order to effect this change, the Canadian government would have to overcome some significant challenges.

Paradigmatic erosion, 1988–95

Although the stage had been set by late 1985 for full-scale paradigm change, the exclusivity of the CFT paradigm, cast in only abstract terms when trade negotiations began the following May, was imminently fleeting as it became clear that Canadian negotiators would be unable to secure an agreement on the removal of NTBs (Hart *et al.* 1994). Oddly, despite a causal logic that relied upon the comprehensive elimination of trade barriers, it was clear to negotiators early on that, while neither party would agree to the maintenance of elaborate national subsidization schedules the likes of which might define a comprehensive industrial policy, neither Canada nor the United States would be willing to eliminate industrial subsidies completely (Doern and Tomlin 1991a). The outcome was negotiated protectionism of a sort without any underlying industrial policy rationale (Doern 1990; Doern and Tomlin 1991b). The consequence was a free trade deal that failed to institutionalize comprehensive free trade as a new policy paradigm.

Pressure was now on Canadian policy-makers to decide what to do. Having invested considerable time and energy into negotiating a free trade deal, albeit an imperfect one, the Mulroney Conservatives were committed to see it though. After the agreement had narrowly made the fast track Congressional deadline in the United States, upon presenting the agreement to the Canadian parliament in the summer of 1988, the Liberal-dominated Senate blocked ratification of the agreement. This led to a national election on the issue in November, which the Mulroney Conservatives ultimately won after the government, opposition parties and a number of civil society groups squared off bitterly on the issue of free trade. Shortly thereafter, the Canada–United States Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) became international law.

Outside of government, the Economic Council, acknowledging that CUFTA did not constitute an ideal treaty, and despite some internal dissent, generally championed the agreement's presumed ability to bind governments to adhere to the principles of trade liberalization (Economic Council of Canada 1988). In an exercise of ideational bricolage, Canadian business (as represented by the BCNI), in concert with the Government of Canada, solicited Michael Porter, a prestigious but by no means neoclassical Harvard economist, to advise Canadian government and industry on how they best prepare for restructuring. Rather than argue that the simple elimination of NTBs would force Canadian firms to rationalize as per the logic of the CFT paradigm, Porter (1991) stressed the need for indirect interventions in areas of technological research and skills development, thereby aligning with the revised post-CUFTA stance of the Science Council (Science Council of Canada 1988).

While the theory of the NAIRU survived for a time within the Canadian state, bringing an air of 'tense layering' and 'paradigm synthesis' to disjointed attempts to alleviate unemployment in the 1990s (Jackson 2000; Kay 2007), policy means centred on the comprehensive elimination of NTBs gave way to interpretive frameworks that instead accommodated their maintenance (Doern and Tomlin 1991a). Whereas, prior to 1988, the CFT and LIP paradigms were commensurable at the level of policy ends but incommensurable at the level of policy means, after 1988, the CFT and LIP paradigms came to be commensurable at both means-related and ends-related levels (see Table 1). That said, the instruments that might characterize a comprehensive industrial policy were tacitly forbidden by CUFTA, resulting in abortive Liberal plans to establish a national innovation system after regaining power in 1993 and generally ad hoc attempts on the part of Canadian governments to navigate trade agreements into the 1990s (Doern and Tomlin 1996; Howse and Chandler 1997).

Ideas, relative commensurability and policy change

In summary, the early 1980s was a period characterized by ideational softening and recombination that resulted in the articulation of liberal industrial policy as a hybrid featuring both free trade and protectionist dimensions. Yet, despite having the support of many influential actors, LIP had its logic refuted by important observers who argued that targeted trade was inconsistent with their own logic for pursuing free trade, which had by that point crystallized into obstinate policy core beliefs. Free trade was about eliminating NTBs, not sustaining them. Protectionism therefore *became* incommensurable with free trade in the eyes of important stakeholders, the Macdonald Commission and, shortly thereafter, in the eyes of the state (Canada 1985b).

But this is only half the story. While the Mulroney Conservatives were able to overcome institutional obstacles to implementing a free trade deal, they were unable to negotiate an agreement reflective of the logic of CFT. As a consequence, the institutionalization of a free trade programme in the form of CUFTA did not amount to the institutionalization of a paradigmatic project

Table 1 Core characteristics of three paradigmatic approaches to trade-industrial policy

	Paradigms		
	National economic strategy (dominant 1975–80)	*Liberal industrial policy* (dominant 1980–84)	*Comprehensive free trade* (dominant 1985–88)
Ends-related characteristics	State support of national industry (sunrise and sunset) expected to yield *full employment*.	Cultivation of national champions and sunrise industries expected to yield *economic rationalization*.	Market discipline expected to yield *economic rationalization*. Partial retreat from fiscal policy expected to yield *price stability*.
Means-related characteristics	Large-scale use of protective *NTBs* and GATT-permitted *tariffs*.	Selective use of technology-focused facilitative *NTBs*.	Treaties guarantee the *elimination of trade barriers* (tariffs and NTBs).
Relative commensurability	*Inconsistent* but commensurable with *means* of LIP.	*Inconsistent* but commensurable with *means* of NES.	*Incommensurable* with *means* of NES.
	Inconsistent but commensurable with *ends* of LIP.	*Inconsistent* but commensurable with *ends* of NES.	*Incommensurable* with *ends* of NES
	Incommensurable with *means* of CFT.	(pre-1988) *Incommensurable* with *means* of CFT.	(pre-1988) *Incommensurable* with *means* of LIP.
	Incommensurable with *ends* of CFT.	(post-1988) *Inconsistent* with *means* of CFT.	(post-1988) *Inconsistent* with *means* of LIP.
		Complementary with *ends* of CFT.	*Complementary* with *ends* of LIP.
Level of institutionalization	Weak.	weak.	Incomplete.

since the incommensurability of ideas surrounding NTBs was not sustained by the agreement. Instead, this paradigmatic logic, which served as the impetus for negotiating the agreement in the first place, was fleeting. Contrary to conventional accounts, subsequent policy change was not of a paradigmatic nature but tended rather to take the form of marginal value adjustments as policy-makers found ways of dealing with the incongruous layering of a free trade policy upon an existing subsidy regime.

CONCLUSION

Rather than seeing paradigmatic ideas as something that contributes to policy stability, I have argued that in the real world of policy-making, three types of bricolage (recombinative coupling, brokerage and marginal value adjustments) serve to compromise the integrity, paradigmatic or otherwise, of the cognitive ideas that undergird policy solutions. The case of Canada's move toward free trade has been consistent with this view of the policy process. Initial recalcitrance gave way to softening and recombination during agenda setting, prior to the expansion of conflict and, eventually, the re-ossification of coalition positions. Yet, despite their eventual adherence to a paradigm (i.e., a set of ideas delimiting a range of acceptable action), the wishes of the dominant coalition were not directly translated into policy. Problems of institutionalization instead prevented policy-makers from following the logic of any one of the three previously championed paradigms.

This is not to say that the paradigms concept is useless to researchers. Rather, as Baumgartner (2014) suggests, paradigmatic ideas are but one unique and exceptionally rare type of policy idea amongst many. But rather than viewing paradigms simply as 'big' ideas, I have emphasized that 'third order' ideas are all encompassing; they reflect such a well-articulated understanding of how the world works that they define the bounds of rational action under that paradigm. Just as policy researchers require means for making sense of behaviour when actors possess ambiguous preferences, the discipline still requires a theory of policy ideas separate from policy paradigms (Baumgartner 2014; Berman 2013). I have stressed the relative nature of commensurability in the hope of outlining the parallels, linkages and associations between paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic ideas. In particular, I have aimed to demonstrate that, while paradigmatic ideas may not be 'smaller' than others, they may be much less influential than is often recognized. In this sense, paradigmatic ideas may be less influential than those called upon to bridge competing interests, broker compromises or conform abstractions to reality. Put differently, paradigmatic ideas may be less important than those that extend beyond them.

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NOTES

1 For most recent discussions, see *Journal of European Public Policy* 21(3), 2014; *Governance* 26(2), 2013; Skogstad (2011); and Hogan and Howlett (forthcoming).
2 Merton (1973 [1945]). For early reference to policy paradigms, see Rein (1972).
3 As Blyth (2013: 211) puts it, 'the third level is a struggle over the meaning of anomalies, not their existence. Incommensurability ensures that meaning is always contestable'.
4 This is why rational choice theory has focused on instrumental rationality (Elster 1994). Indeed, the same limitations of the Bayesian explanation explored by Blyth (2013) are outlined by Hirschman (1985), namely that much about public policy – the entire 'third order' of understanding, if you like – is inexplicable from a rational choice perspective.
5 'Less predictable' will suffice.

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