(Marsh and Rhodes, 1992). Within a particular sector, it was alleged, interest group leaders and senior civil servants (but rarely members of the legislature) formed their own small communities. All the members in the policy village knew each other and sought to remain on good terms. The participants developed a shared world view. They learned to trust and respect each other. Village business was conducted behind closed doors to prevent political posturing and to allow a quiet life for all. Insiders were sharply distinguished from outsiders. The golden rule was ‘Never upset the apple cart.’

These cosy iron triangles and policy communities have decayed in many liberal democracies, contributing to a somewhat more pluralistic environment. Policies in most sectors are subject to closer scrutiny by the media, new public interest groups protest loudly when they spot the public being taken for a ride, and legislators are more willing to speak out. As issues become more complex, so more groups are drawn into the policy process, making it harder to stitch together insider deals. In the United States, where this trend has gone furthest, the committee barons who used to dominate Congress have lost much of their power. The iron has gone out of the triangle; now influence over decisions depends on what you know as much as whom you know.

Reflecting these trends, the talk now is of issue (or policy) networks. These refer to relationships between the familiar set of organizations involved in policy-making: government departments, interest groups, and legislative committees, with the addition of expert outsiders. However, the structure of an issue network is much looser than that of an iron triangle; the impact of a particular interest group varies from one topic within the field to the next, depending on its expertise. The idea of a ‘network’ focuses on relationships between actors; the participants themselves, and ad hoc coalitions between them, may change from topic to topic. For instance, several interest groups might form a short-term coalition to promote a particular policy on which they can agree. As Heclo (1978, p. 102) pointed out in an influential statement:

The notions of iron triangles and subgovernments presume small circles of participants who have succeeded in becoming largely autonomous. Issue networks, on the other hand, comprise a large number of participants with quite variable degrees of mutual commitment … it is almost impossible to say where a network leaves off and its environment begins.

Clearly, the idea of issue networks enables us to portray policy-making in liberal democracies more positively. A wider range of interests participate in decisions, the bias towards protective groups is reduced, new groups can enter the debate, and a sound argument carries greater weight. Inward-looking policy villages have given way to more open policy towns. Because networks operate in a non-hierarchical way, we can portray their participants as engaged in a constructive exchange of