

# Conspicuous Appropriation

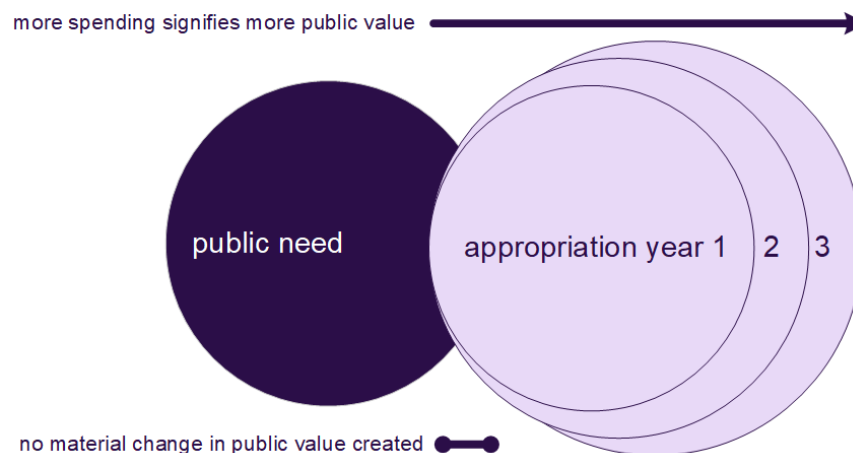
The allocation of public funds is a powerful signifier of what a society values. Sometimes, this symbolic value is so significant that it eclipses the tangible benefits derived from the investment. Symbolic investments that do not materially improve outcomes divert resources away from real solutions to public needs. This type of conspicuous appropriation, where spending is an end in itself, risks privileging investment in rhetoric over results.

Most people making decisions about public spending see themselves as rational, moral actors striving for better outcomes. In practice, not all public actions or investments deliver the benefits they target. This can be because actions were poorly conceived or poorly executed, or both. Doing things that seem worthwhile often has representative legitimacy regardless of the effects, and high symbolic value can be used to justify continued investment in strategies that are not helping.

Stakeholder perspectives frequently contribute to this perception. Constituencies that form around public investments tend to advocate for continuation and funding certainty, without considering alternative approaches that might offer more value. Initiatives with more vocal constituencies are often seen as worthier, regardless of their actual results.

These challenges are not unique to publicly funded organisations. Individuals also engage in virtue signalling, such as conspicuous consumption to project an image of prosperity while forgoing more basic needs, or conspicuous conservation to highlight green credentials at a cost to the environment. People find it more difficult to relinquish something they already have, however unsatisfactory, than to conceive of something that might offer greater value.

In publicly funded organisations, conspicuous appropriation can become self-perpetuating. It is easier to announce new funding than to solve complex problems, and easier to promise new spending than better results. The comfortable fiction that spending more is equivalent to doing better makes it easier to convince ourselves that our work is worthwhile.



Challenging conspicuous appropriation creates space to find better alternatives to current approaches. This requires action on two fronts:

- persuading decision makers to define public value based on outcomes rather than inputs
- persuading stakeholders to surrender things they perceive as having value, for the less certain pursuit of better outcomes.

Setting and communicating objectives in terms of outcomes brings its own risks of failure, but also brings opportunities that drive toward eventual success. Dedicating a proportion of investment to research and experimentation, for example, can deliver more value in the long term than locking resources into symbolic, but not necessarily effective, initiatives.

People in publicly funded organisations are motivated to solve public problems, and it is much more appealing to take imperfect action than be seen to do nothing. When being seen to act takes precedence over the objective value of our actions, it is easy to get locked in a cycle of conspicuous appropriation, where we lack the resources to solve difficult problems because we dare not withdraw funding from ineffective initiatives.

Challenging conspicuous appropriation will create more opportunities to experiment, learn, and improve authentic responses to challenging social problems. Only by honestly appraising the value of our public spending can we maximise value for money, and for the public, by putting purely symbolic spending in its proper place: conspicuous by its absence.