When Frank Fischer first approached me with a request to edit a handbook on agenda setting, I was a bit hesitant because I was of two minds. On the one hand, as series editor his invitation was an honor and a pleasure. He had (and still has, I presume) confidence in my judgment and skills to complete this difficult task. I took the fact he asked me among many equally or even more qualified academics as validation of my academic reputation and desire to contribute to the field. On the other hand, I was timid. I knew this would be a difficult undertaking, not only because it involved coordinating 24 contributions by 33 contributors (far more than many edited volumes include), but also because it is time-consuming and highly controversial as a scholarly enterprise. I had no models to consult; this is the first of its kind in agenda setting as far as I know. How would I do it? In true multiple streams fashion, I decided to turn a possible risk into an opportunity to bring together disparate scholarship in a single volume that will provide guidance to research in agenda setting in the short and medium terms. The time was ripe for such a project and to complete it, I asked and answered the following questions.

What is the purpose of the handbook and what does the editor hope to achieve? This is the problem side of the project and perhaps the most important because it provides direction and meaning. The purpose of this handbook is to introduce students and scholars alike to the most up-to-date and important research in agenda setting. The aim is to cover as many topics and dimensions of agenda research as possible in as comprehensive a way as possible. Given that such a project is the first of its kind, I see this handbook as a reference tool and as tasty “food for thought.”

What should the structure of the handbook be and how can it optimize results? What should be covered and what should be left out? Some may disagree with my solution – after all, we academics are trained to disagree – but I decided to cover the four “I”s of public policy: individuals, ideas, institutions, and insight. Unlike other handbooks, I believed this one must include something about the individuals who opened up the field of agenda setting. Thankfully, the field is relatively new and the “founding” individuals very few. Guided by ancient tradition, I asked their former students, colleagues, and collaborators to discuss the “work and days” of Roger Cobb, Charles Elder, and John Kingdon. These are not biographies or an explication of the corpus of their scholarship. They
are intended to place information about individuals within the context of their times in order to provide a better sense of why and how the field was created. Ideas involve frameworks, theories, and models that scholars use to explain the problem of how the agenda is set. Institutions bias the process by favoring some problem definitions and not others. How these three ingredients work in practice is the fourth “I”: empirical insight or applications. Students of public policy must see how models are applied and what kinds of insight they provide. The organization of the handbook is neither exhaustive nor absolute. It reflects my own “mobilization of bias.”

How should I select contributors to achieve the project’s goals? Choosing among so many good scholars worldwide was very difficult, reflecting my own ignorance and predilection. I tried to include a wide range of junior and senior scholars, working with different approaches, and coming from diverse national and institutional backgrounds. Each scholar has something different to contribute to the literature but there is overlap. It is important for students of agenda setting to realize that two people may look at the same institution, the media for example, and reach different conclusions about its significance. Unlike many edited volumes, I decided that each contribution needed to be freestanding in order to better aid scholarship. Each contributor was given complete freedom to address the assigned topic in the ways that seemed best to him or her. Accolades should therefore go to the contributors while concerns about omissions should come to me, as I am ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the project.

Of course, endeavors of this type are never the product of a single person but rather the result of a collective effort, guided and occasionally driven by the editor. My deepest appreciation goes to Frank for his confidence in my judgment and skill and to the commissioning editor at Edward Elgar, Emily Mew, who responded to my queries, helped to make the process smoother, and advised me on how to handle “interesting” (in the Chinese sense) situations as they arose. I also want to thank the contributors, who replied to my requests and occasional tirades with patience, collegiality, and responsibility that I hope to someday emulate. I thank my Research Assistant, Marybrook Burchfield, who responded to my queries with far more patience and professionalism than I would have if I were in her place. Special thanks go to my department and my colleagues. A pleasant and collegial environment is always necessary to produce the best results.

Finally, I give a heartfelt thank you to my wife, Ellen, and my daughter, Zoë, for tolerating my absentmindedness during the process. I will make it up to you guys.