

**H&P seminar:
How Historians Can Shape Policy**

1 JUNE 2011, KING'S COLLEGE, LONDON

SYNOPSIS OF H&P POLICY SEMINAR DISCUSSION

The seminar is part of H&P's monitoring and evaluation, which took the form of interviews, first with our historian members and second with journalists and policy makers. Overall, the aims of the monitoring and evaluation research are two-fold:

Summative – the story of what has happened, stakeholders' experiences of H&P

Formative – ideas for what could happen, how H&P could be shaped for the future to better work with stakeholders.

The seminar is part of the formative evaluation – in particular the key question of what *is* the policy making process and how is impact on public policy measured? The seminar was not premised on a particular answer or understanding of those questions. Indeed the agenda was intentionally left open – to be shaped by attendees – emerging as it did from the second phase of research, and providing the opportunity for policy makers and journalists to continue the discussion catalysed by telephone interviews and to 'connect'.

As it turned out, the discussion emphasized the ambiguity and complexity of the policy making process – and that of historical research! It also underlined the challenges for H&P to respond to the different needs and functions of civil servants and journalists.

KEY THEMES

Perceptions of historians by policy makers

- They are seen as purveyors of facts and statistics, not interpretation, let alone the nuances of historical research. The importance of certainty to policy makers – expressed in clear, actionable recommendations was emphasized. Ministers don't like to hear 'No, you can't do that'. Nor do they like advice connected to a particular policy position (historians disadvantaged compared to supposedly neutral, independent scientists and engineers.) 'History personalities' were liked. Social scientists more commonly acted as advisors (sometimes of history, but dated history) to government than historians. Historians offered a unique approach to contemporary problems – this was recognised by some institutions, such as the World Bank. For historians, who are used to dealing with uncertainty and complexity,

the challenge of dealing with policy makers was the ability to offer clear-cut recommendations.

Institutional memory

- Increasingly this is being lost in Whitehall through restructuring, cost savings and staff redeployment/turnover, with the consequence that civil servants lack knowledge of past policies and the broader historical context relevant to their departmental concerns. Some participants thought departments such as the Treasury and FCO did retain institutional knowledge – for example the FCO maintains its historians and official histories project.

Timing

- Spotting opportunities to intervene on topical issues, and having the networks and contacts beyond academia to do so, are important. For example:
 - Prior to politicians' important speeches, when experts are brought in to brainstorm policy ideas. A key argument for involving historians in this process is to ensure problematic policies and errors of the past are not repeated, thus preventing ministerial embarrassment.
 - Seek out leading thinkers behind politicians, such as Maurice Glasman and Phillip Blond – to what extent do these influencers have a solid grasp of history?

Opportunism

- Events, especially crises, can create opportunities for intervention with research and exchanges with civil servants. Is there scope for H&P to invite junior ministers and/or senior civil servants to meetings with historians to hear new research relevant to policy concerns? Notwithstanding urgent issues such as HIV/AIDS, Gulf War Syndrome, most policy is not made in a crisis. Often policy is already decided and government is looking for confirmation of it from external advisors.
- Historians are well placed to analyse events that have been policy drivers and changed discourses.

Who makes policy in Whitehall?

- Unclear: civil servants (grade 7 or above?), advisors close to senior politicians.
- Most of governing is about administration not policy making - the capacity to create new policies is limited. Implementing manifesto commitments and responding to unexpected events may be the limit.

SPECIFIC IDEAS OF WHAT H&P COULD DO BETTER/MORE OF

- Policy papers are fine but are they read? Or perhaps just the executive summary? In themselves they don't require action – therefore they should play a supporting role to workshops and seminars with policy makers. Overall, there should be a greater focus on activities that encourage interaction (see below).
- Shorter papers/briefings on key influential concepts – e.g. global, protection, childhood.
- In addition to policy papers and shorter briefings, more face-to-face meetings between historians and key policy people (junior ministers, senior civil servants). This idea was inspired by the H&P Trade Union Forum, which has brought together junior ministers and advisors with historians.
- More active twitter presence.

- Greater opportunities for interactivity online – e.g. blogs, videos.
- Liaison with think tanks – at least keeping tabs as a guide to upcoming issues.
- Analysis of readers of the H&P feature in BBC History magazine – do they perceive the (policy) difference with other articles? Do they like the column?
- Make the case to historians that they need H&P due to the REF emphasis on impact/benefit to the wider world.
- Holding an annual policy seminar, modelled on this original, may offer a useful forum for our stakeholders, allowing thorny issues to be discussed and H&P's activities to be interrogated. Strategic issues, such as whether H&P should bother with media coverage at all, if its ultimate audience is policy makers, could be explored in more detail.