



HISTORY & POLICY

Connecting historians, policymakers and the media

Maximising the impact of humanities and social science research

History & Policy submission to the British Academy

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1 About Us

History & Policy is an academic initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history.

We work to:

- Demonstrate the relevance of history to contemporary policymaking
- Increase the links between historians and those analysing, discussing and deciding public policy in the UK today and internationally
- Address the lack of historical input in today's 'evidence-based' policy environment
- Advise historians wanting to engage more effectively with policymakers and media

History & Policy shares the British Academy's belief that policy and decision-making could be improved by greater awareness and use of HSS research, and in particular historical research. This submission focuses on two of the key areas of impact outlined in the research summary: government and policymaking and the media, and draws on the lessons and experiences gained in the five years since the [History & Policy website](#) was established.

This submission is made on behalf of the History & Policy management team:

- **Virginia Berridge**, Professor of History and Director of the Centre for History in Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine;
- **Alastair Reid**, Fellow and Director of Studies in History, Girton College, University of Cambridge;
- **Simon Szreter**, Fellow of St John's College and Reader in History and Public Policy at the Faculty of History, University of Cambridge;
- **Pat Thane FBA**, Professor of Contemporary British History, Institute of Historical Research; and
- History & Policy advisory group member **David Cannadine**, FBA, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Professor of British History at the Institute of Historical Research.

History & Policy began life in 2002 as a website (www.historyandpolicy.org), founded by Alastair Reid and Simon Szreter as a forum to make historians' work accessible to non-academic – and particularly policy and media – audiences. The site is now home to almost 70 short, accessible papers in which historians analyse current policy issues ranging from child support to carbon rationing and pensions to public health.

The History & Policy website has become increasingly popular, with a nine-fold increase in website activity since its launch in 2002. The founders recognised that a complementary programme of engagement was needed to bring together historians and policymakers. In late 2005, a collaboration between the Cambridge founders, the Institute of Historical Research and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine secured a grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative for a three-year pilot project to build on the popularity of the website by connecting historians with the



policy world. History & Policy now has two full-time staff based in the Centre for Contemporary British History at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, and a network of over 120 historians based at universities around the UK and abroad.

The History & Policy project and a redesigned website were publicly launched at a discussion evening and reception, *Why Policy Needs History*, in December 2007 (see case study below, p10). We now have a programme of engagement with policymakers and media and a clear vision to establish History and Policy as the first port-of-call for anyone in government, parliament, think-tanks or the media who wants to understand the history of a current policy issue or access an expert historian.

Our primary audiences are:

- Ministers and their advisers in central and devolved governments
- Civil servants in government departments and NDPBs
- Local and regional government
- MPs, Lords and parliamentary staff
- Lobby groups, charities and think tanks
- Opinion-formers in the media
- Professional historians (from PhD students to Professors) working in universities and independently

2 What history can offer policy

The British Academy's 2004 review, *That full complement of riches*, primarily referred to history in the context of cultural enrichment and heritage. High profile individual historians were occasionally mentioned as having contributed to public policy and debate, but more often these examples were dominated by social and political scientists.

History & Policy was set up to correct the assumption that history is less relevant to the management of current policy problems than the social and natural sciences. Too often policy reflects unexamined historical assumptions and clichés; politicians and commentators frequently lament policy failures and question why the lessons of the past were not learned. But historians are rarely invited to the policy table when new ideas or directions are being discussed. The result is policy that, at best, fails to learn past lessons and, at worst, repeats past mistakes. Yet given the opportunity, historians can shed light on the causes of current problems and even suggest innovative solutions.

Historians can provide valuable insights into current policy issues: When and why did the issue surface? What solutions have been tried before? What worked, what didn't and why? Often they are in a position to make important contributions, but to be taken seriously as equals in public discussions they may need to acquire new information and skills. History & Policy aims to address both policymakers' reluctance to 'let historians in' and the barriers preventing historians from accessing the necessary skills and networks (see below, barriers to engagement).



Many History & Policy papers demonstrate how a lack of historical awareness contributed to policy failures and ineffectiveness. The contributors typically identify the following problems:

- Ignorance of or failure to learn from the long-term background to a policy problem or its historical precedents;
- Reliance on flawed, misleading historical myths and assumptions that are fed into the policy process without interrogation; and
- Use of politically convenient, but ill-informed or inappropriate, historical analogies to support a current policy direction.

The following case studies illustrate these tendencies with examples from History & Policy papers. They also demonstrate the wide range of policy areas to which historians can make a contribution.

Case studies: uses and abuses of history in policy

Britishness:

“Gordon Brown has regularly spoken about the importance of Britishness. In this the former-Chancellor and now Prime Minister has reflected a general concern of the government, which last year ordered a review on how British history could be inserted into the citizenship curriculum in schools so as to strengthen notions of national identity and national unity. The central place of history in strengthening national identity is neither peculiarly British nor is it an invention of New Labour... Given the extremely negative past record of historiographical nationalism, the advice from history to politicians surely must be to shy away from building national identity on a sense of a shared past.”

[*History and national identity: why they should remain divorced*](#), Stefan Berger, November 2007

Child support:

“The Henshaw review of the [Child Support Agency], recommending its abolition, has rightly emphasised the need to engender a culture of compliance amongst fathers towards maintaining their children and the need for tougher enforcement... However, in engendering this culture of personal responsibility it is important to realise the futility of punitive approaches. As history has shown, these do not work and usually result in the state spending more money for only limited return.”

[*Is it futile to try to get non-resident fathers to maintain their children?*](#) Tanya Evans, October 2006

Climate Change:

“History suggests that we cannot rely on the transition to biofuels and renewable energy sources to cut our carbon footprint. To return to an ‘organic economy’ and supply our total energy needs from biofuels, each hectare of European land would have to be 30 times more productive than it was 200 years ago. While the history of our transition from coal to oil-dependency suggests that a significant shift to renewable energy sources would require an extraordinary and unprecedented growth in their use, driven by huge incentives and political willpower... To stand a chance of



meeting emissions targets, politicians need to switch their attention from energy efficiency to controls on consumption.”

News release to accompany [Facing the challenge of climate change: energy efficiency and energy consumption](#), Paul Warde, October 2007

Intelligence

“In the quarter-century before 9/11 much academic research actually lessened our understanding of terrorism by extrapolating from short-term late-20th trends, as embodied for example by the IRA, rather than the long-term threat posed by holy terror and other fanatical, ideologically-based terrorism, which seeks to destroy its enemies rather than bomb them to the negotiating table.”

[Intelligence analysis needs to look backwards before looking forward](#), Christopher Andrew, June 2004

Iraq

“Starting in the autumn of 2002, we began to hear that U.S. policymakers were looking into Japan and Germany after World War II as examples or even models of successful military occupations. In the case of Japan, the imagined analogy with Iraq is probably irresistible... The problem is that few if any of the ingredients that made this success possible are present - or would be present - in the case of Iraq. The lessons we can draw from the occupation of Japan all become warnings where Iraq is concerned... The occupation of Japan offers no model whatsoever for any projected occupation of Iraq. On the contrary, it should stand as a warning that we are lurching toward war with no idea of what we are really getting into.”

[Don't expect democracy this time: Japan and Iraq](#), John W. Dower, April 2003

Juvenile justice:

“At present, the [juvenile justice] system is paralysed by a confusion of aims, as the government attempts to pander to contradictory facets of public opinion. It vilifies juvenile criminals as 'louts' and 'yobs', proclaiming a return to an imaginary pre-1960s punitive utopia. On the other hand, it seeks to maintain a sense of self-satisfied humanitarianism, suggesting that the juvenile justice system needs to help young offenders be 'healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.' In practice, these two commitments are incompatible, because 'louts', unlike vulnerable and damaged children, have no obvious claim on government funds. There are no easy solutions to this tension, but an end to the justification of policy choices through historical myth-making would be an excellent start.”

[Historical myth-making in juvenile justice policy](#), Abigail Wills, July 2007

Prostitution:

“Despite the air of novelty in contemporary prostitution policy, much of what the government proposes has already been experimented with. Street crackdowns, for instance, have been enforced several times over the past century or so, and these increases in repression have always had troubling impacts on the safety of the women involved in prostitution ... While the past century has witnessed massive changes in the status and rights of women, prostitution law has remained static and policies toward prostitution have grown increasingly repressive. A historical



perspective thus reveals the ways in which even the newest prostitution-control strategies rely on outdated concepts.”

[Paying the price again: prostitution policy in historical perspective](#), Julia Laite, October 2006

3 Maximising the impact of historical research

The examples above illustrate how historians can highlight the pitfalls in current or emerging policy and make policy recommendations based on their research. History & Policy aims to promote the use of historical research as a tool of analysis at the *start* of the policy process - when issues are being discussed, ideas consulted on and policy aims agreed. The following examples from our own experience illustrate some of the crucial factors in increasing the impact of historical research.

3.1 Accessibility

History & Policy was founded to make historians and their research more accessible to policy and media audiences. From the outset, the project recognised that to increase the impact of historical research on policymaking, historians must be willing and able to:

- Make themselves accessible to policymakers and media;
- Keep up-to-date and engage with the policy environment relevant to their research;
- Consider policy relevance when formulating new research projects
- Identify the lessons and implications for current policy arising from their research;
- Present research in a way that is accessible to non-academic audiences
- Publicise research to policy audiences through the media, events and personal contacts;
- Follow-up any publicity activity through personal communication with key policymakers or opinion-formers; and
- Persevere if initial reactions to their work among media and policymakers are unfavourable or dismissive.

In 2007, we set up the UK’s first expert bank of historians, which now has over 120 members, willing and able to get involved in policy and media discussion. This network serves several purposes:

- Acting as a central point of contact for policymakers and media seeking to contact a historian;
- Providing a pool of historical experts that, unlike individual universities’ expert banks, draws on the expertise of academics around the UK and abroad;
- Enabling us to keep historians up-to-date on relevant policy developments and match them with opportunities for engagement;



- Providing a record of historians' skills and experience in dealing with policy and media audiences; and
- Giving historians access to professional communications support to help them acquire the information and skills they need to engage more effectively.

The following case study illustrates how a History & Policy paper can lead on to policy engagement.

Case study: from History & Policy paper to policy engagement

Dr Mark Roodhouse, a Lecturer in History at the University of York, found that writing a History & Policy paper was the first step towards engaging with the policy debate around individual carbon trading as a means to reduce CO2 emissions.

During 2006, Mark kept up to date with policy discussion in this area and realised his expertise on consumer rationing during the 1940s equipped him to assess proposals for carbon rationing from a historical perspective. Mark wrote a History & Policy paper, [Rationing returns: a solution to global warming](#), to make his research relevant and accessible to a policy audience. He also made contact with researchers at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research and provided advice on the implementation of carbon rationing to policymakers at the Green Party.

Mark's willingness to engage with the current policy issues and react quickly to new developments meant that his History & Policy paper could be published to coincide with the launch of the government's draft Climate Change Bill in March 2007. This timing with a major policy announcement was crucial to increasing the impact of his paper in the policy sphere. History & Policy was able to place an article he had written with the [Financial Times](#) and issue a news release linking his research to the draft Bill. This resulted in [media coverage](#) in the *Daily Express*, *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, *The New Statesman* and *The Daily Telegraph* and opened up new opportunities for Mark to plug into the policy networks discussing carbon allowances.

In August 2007, History & Policy arranged for Mark to make a [written submission](#) to the Environmental Audit Select Committee's inquiry into personal carbon allowances. Publication of their report is pending.

3.2 Events

For historical research to have maximum impact, it is vital that historians engage with those discussing and deciding policy, as well as publishing their work in more accessible formats. Over the last two years, History & Policy has proved there is a market for policy-themed events that bring together historians, politicians, civil servants and representatives of think-tanks and industry to discuss current policy issues. Often our events are organised in collaboration with partner organisations, including the British Academy, the House of Commons Library and other academic centres.



Case study: pensions book launch

In June 2005, the British Academy hosted a one-day symposium, sponsored by Zurich Financial Services and B&CE Group, to explore [*Why has it all gone wrong? The past, present and future of British pensions*](#). The event was organised by historians Hugh Pemberton, Pat Thane and Noel Whiteside and brought together experts on the past and present of British pensions. The British Academy prepared the speakers' papers for publication as an essay collection.

The Academy worked with History & Policy to launch the new book, *Britain's Pensions Crisis: history and policy* (Oxford University Press, 2006), with maximum policy impact. The support of Frank Field MP enabled the event to be held in Portcullis House, Westminster in October 2006. History & Policy organised a panel discussion on: [*Does the Pensions White Paper repeat the mistakes of the past?*](#) The event aimed to place the new book firmly in the current policy context and force the participants to engage with pensions history, which had so far been ignored or misrepresented in the policy world. On the panel were historian and co-editor Professor Pat Thane, Pensions Minister James Purnell MP, Shadow Pensions Minister Nigel Waterson MP, former Pensions Commissioner Professor John Hills, economist Dr Ros Altmann and *Financial Times* journalist Nick Timmins. The audience of 80 included academics, politicians, civil servants, journalists and representatives from think-tanks, lobby-groups and industry.

Importantly, the event and its pre-publicity forced the Department for Work and Pensions to engage with pensions history and modify Ministers' glib references in speeches and news releases to 'the biggest renewal of our pension system since the Beveridge reforms.'

Our experience suggests the following lessons are helpful in framing events to foster engagement between policymakers and researchers:

- **Timing:** policymakers will be more receptive to history when an issue is live; the earlier in the policy process history is introduced, the more chance it stands of having impact;
- **Relevance:** Events must be framed in a way that links the main historical issues or arguments firmly to the current policy climate, the historical research must be made available in a digestible format and historians must have a clear message for policymakers;
- **Format:** For short-term publicity purposes a two-hour panel event is often suitable, but to explore a policy area in depth and produce papers or policy recommendations, a whole day event or a series of shorter events may be required;
- **Audience:** Careful research is needed to identify an appropriate policy audience, including organisations and individuals who already have the ear of government; the event must be conveniently located to maximise their attendance;
- **Partners:** Working with partners can provide access to room space or policy contacts and provide extra organisational resources;



- **Resources:** Successful events do not need to be flashy or expensive and time is best invested in planning to address the issues above.

Case-study: binge-drinking

Virginia Berridge's team at the Centre for History in Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, have an ongoing programme of public and policy engagement, funded by the Wellcome Trust. In February 2006, they organised a workshop to explore the history and policy of binge-drinking, bringing together historians, other academics and policymakers - including the leader of Westminster City Council – to share expertise and ideas. The event led to the publication of a research report, [*The normalisation of binge-drinking? An historical and cross cultural investigation with implications for action*](#), on the Alcohol Education Research Council website, where it is accessible to researchers and practitioners of all disciplines. The workshop also spawned a History & Policy paper, [*Binge-drinking and moral panics: historical parallels?*](#), by Professor Peter Borsay of Aberystwyth University, which attracted national and regional press coverage.

3.3 Media

The media are an important channel of communication with opinion-formers and policymakers. Our experience shows that quality media coverage increases the profile of historical research and individual historians with these audiences, as well as driving website activity. Interaction with journalists also helps to build historians' confidence in communicating their work to policy audiences, where the same skills of short, sharp communication are required. We regularly place articles written by historians with national newspapers, arrange interviews with historians on national and regional radio and attract coverage of new History & Policy papers and events in national, regional, online and specialist media.

Case study: historical research in the news media

“Pension historians warned yesterday that governments throughout the last century missed serious opportunities to achieve lasting pensions reform ‘about once every decade.’”

Financial Times, 4 April 2006

“Joining us in the studio, Dr James Whitfield is a historian and former police inspector and was on duty in ‘77, the first time riot shields were used [at the Notting Hill Carnival]”

Dotun Adebayo, *The Sunday Night Special*, BBC Radio London, 27 August 2006

“Vice girls fearing they may be targeted by a serial killer are urging the police to launch an amnesty... Historian Julia Laite of St Edmund's College, Cambridge, said: ‘It just seems absolutely bizarre that women who are victims are the ones that are being punished... we need social programmes for a long-term solution.’”

Press Association, 11 December, 2006



“SURVIVORS of the Aberfan disaster hailed the announcement of a £2m fund for the village as ‘final closure’ on the tragedy... Oxford historian Professor Iain McLean, whose 2000 book *Aberfan: Government and Disasters* outlined how the Wilson Government used the charitable funds to pay for the removal of the coal tips, said, ‘This is fantastic news. I congratulate Huw Lewis and the trustees of the Aberfan charities for bringing this about. After 40 years, a long-standing injustice has been righted.’”

Western Mail, 1 February 2007

“Miliband famously proposed that each individual be given a carbon budget. This is the sort of scheme that brings joy to the hearts of such as Professor Mark Roodhouse of York University, who believes that carbon rationing can accomplish what clothes and food rationing did during the Blitz: create a sense of social solidarity, and, for a Labour Party ‘never comfortable with the politics of post-war affluence the opportunity to return to the politics of austerity’.”

Irwin Stelzer, *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 April 2007

“The regularity with which politicians invoke history and ‘tradition’, particularly in the field of health, would suggest that policy making is infused with the lessons of history. But my research, based on interviews with health policy advisers, suggests that most politicians have only a tenuous grasp of history. They draw on it as a source of clichés to promote policy; but limited use is made of historical interpretation to inform the policy development process.”

Virginia Berridge, *The Guardian*, 20 June 2007

“Public worries about ‘binge drinking’ may seem a modern phenomena, but new historical analysis suggests Britain went through the same sort of moral panic 300 years ago when the ‘gin craze’ hit the streets.”

The Observer, 9 September 2007

“Politicians generally now are less aware of history, I think though it’s not only history, a great deal of policy is not based on evidence from any source... it’s this belief that things must be changing, things must be different than in the past and therefore we have to have a new solution, whereas very often, they aren’t and we ought to be more aware of that.”

Pat Thane, *Start the Week*, BBC Radio 4, 26 November, 2007

“Historians and politicians have a greater responsibility than just to say ‘we’re gadflies’, there are major and significant areas of policy where history could have a beneficent influence.”

David Cannadine, *Today*, BBC Radio 4, 5 December, 2007

“Yesterday’s calls for the appointment of a chief historical adviser to the government should be welcomed... this would surely provide politicians – and the public – with a contextual, long distance lens through which to view current events. What better way to reduce the prevalence of short-term ‘spin’ politics, and better still, to dispel forever the idea of history as a dead subject.”



The Independent, 6 December, 2007

“Abigail Wills... exposes two contradictory myths: that there was a golden age of law and order; and that treatment of juveniles is now more enlightened. Blair launching Asbos talked of his father's day in the 30s and his own youth when ‘people behaved more respectfully to one another and we are trying to get back to that’. It's bunk: think of teddy boys and razor gangs. We tolerate much less minor violence than we did, and we tolerate teenagers less.”

Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian*, 7 December, 2007

“We have been here before, almost everything has a precedent, never exact, but often revealing. Politicians and the media, however, often behave as if everything is new, risking a repeat of past mistakes... What history can contribute was the theme of a lively symposium in the Churchill Museum in London on Wednesday.”

Peter Riddell, *The Times*, 7 December, 2007

3.4 The publicity mix

History & Policy's recent launch event illustrates how all of the above factors can be combined to maximise awareness of and interest in the role of historical research in policymaking.

Case study: Why Policy Needs History

History & Policy had its public launch, [Why Policy Needs History](#), at the Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Rooms on 5 December 2007. The event was designed to promote the role of historians and historical research in public policymaking, as well as launching the new History & Policy website. It showcased the contribution historians can make to some of the most pressing policy problems facing the new Prime Minister, with papers from leading historians David Cannadine, David Reynolds and Pat Thane. The audience of around 150 people included academics, civil servants, MPs, Lords and their staff, journalists and people working for think-tanks, NGOs, charities and lobby groups.

Pre-publicity focused on David Cannadine's [call for the government to appoint a Chief Historical Adviser](#), which resulted in widespread national press and broadcast coverage, including the *Today* programme, *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Times*. The coverage led to a flood of interest in the event itself and approaches from many policy contacts to discuss ideas and collaboration, and kick-started a debate that continued at the launch about whether and how historians should be involved in policymaking. It also drove a massive increase in activity on the new History & Policy website, with radio and press coverage and links from media websites coinciding with spikes in visitor numbers.



4 Meeting policymakers' needs

The founders of History & Policy were acutely aware that if historians were to have a voice in policymaking, politicians, civil servants and journalists could not be expected to digest long, complex academic papers; history must be presented in a concise and accessible format. Unlike the social and political sciences, historical research has not traditionally been seen as relevant to current policy, so it has been necessary to make the case for its role in policymaking; policymakers have rarely sought out historians' input, so historians must promote and make themselves available to policymakers.

Case study: history's role in health policymaking

History & Policy funded research by Virginia Berridge to explore the way history is currently used in the health policy field and identify the barriers to the involvement of historians. Her report, [History Matters? History's role in health policymaking](#), was based on interviews with 15 'key informants' with recent experience of advising ministers and civil servants on health policy. It revealed that the value of history was recognised, but health policy is currently a historian-free environment, reliant on 'folk histories' to interpret the past and inform decisions in the present.

Professor Berridge identified the following key findings:

- The use of history in health policymaking is currently dependent on political expediency, personal networks, timing and particular policy situations;
- Politicians make limited use of the history and historical interpretation available to them, relying instead on 'folk histories' that revolve around familiar individuals, époques and interpretations;
- In particular, the founding of the NHS in 1948 has a powerful hold over the current government, with ministers invoking the same narrow history - dominated by Nye Bevan - to lend credence to current policies;
- Historians are rarely invited into the policy arena, while social scientists, economists and historically-trained politicians act as 'history brokers';
- Those historians who are 'invited in' are selected on the basis of their public profile or entertainment value, rather than the relevance of their historical expertise;
- Policymakers remain ignorant of and fail to learn from important precedents to some key policy issues, such as the long history of public opposition to vaccination;
- Historians are recognised as providing a perspective that no other discipline can offer, being more enlightening and less prescriptive than political scientists, but their 'message' can be difficult to discern; and
- Historians need to do more to identify and communicate the policy relevance of their research and to explain differing historical interpretations.

The following case study illustrates Professor Berridge's finding that the development of inter-disciplinary relationships can open up access to policy networks for historians.



Case Study- the importance of networks

The experience of History & Policy co-founder Dr Simon Szreter demonstrates the long-term benefits of making connections and building long-term relationships with non-historian colleagues and policy networks in the UK and abroad.

In 2003, Simon gave a public lecture to mark the inauguration of the Centre for History in Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, through which he met Professor Dominic de Savigny, an epidemiologist of the international InDepth Demographic Surveillance Network. This led to an invitation for Simon to address the annual InDepth conference of development demographers in 2004 and present his research on the relationship between the history of identity registration in England and contemporary development policy issues. Simon's historical research was later published in the journal, *World Development*, in January 2007, with simultaneous publication as a History and Policy paper, [*The right of registration: development, identity registration and social security*](#), bringing it to a wide academic audience.

As a result of this and on Professor de Savigny's recommendation, in April 2007 Simon was recruited for his historical expertise into a writing group of the World Health Organisation's [Health Metrics Network](#) and the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) [MEASURE framework](#), which promote the use of accurate and timely information on population, health and nutrition in developing countries. The group produced a series of articles in *The Lancet* calling for the establishment of civil registration systems in the world's poorest countries, where they are mostly absent today. The series was launched with a full [publicity campaign](#) at the Global Forum for Health Research Conference in Beijing in October 2007.

Dr Szreter has since been invited to address the World Bank's annual internal staff training programme on this theme, generating ongoing contacts and dialogue with World Bank staff. In April 2008, History & Policy is collaborating with the World Bank and the new [Brooks World Poverty Institute](#) at Manchester University on an international workshop, *What can Development Policy Learn from History?*, which will bring into dialogue networks of both historians and policy practitioners.

Where policymakers do approach historians for input to a current issue, their needs can range from short, sharp background material for a speech or public statement to commissioned research of the type often carried out by social scientists. The following case study is a rare, but successful example of policymakers recognising how history could enhance their current work and commissioning historians to provide it in an accessible and relevant format.



Case study: commissioned history for policymakers

In 2005, the Government announced a 'root and branch review to investigate the causes of persistent discrimination and inequality in British society'. The Equalities Review was chaired by Trevor Phillips, then Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. It aimed to 'develop a better understanding of the long-term and underlying barriers to opportunity that face many individuals and groups in society, based on evidence of what works at home and abroad,' and inform the work of the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights, including progress towards a Single Equalities Act to codify existing legislation.

The Review panel decided to review equalities across a 100-year period, looking 60 years back as well as 40 years forward. On the recommendation of the ESRC, the Equalities Review team in the Cabinet Office commissioned a team led by Pat Thane, Professor of Contemporary British History at the Institute of Historical Research, to produce a history of equalities since c.1945. Their report, [*Equalities in Great Britain, 1946-2006*](#), explores the drivers and inhibitors of progress towards equality on the basis of age, gender, race and ethnicity, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation and disability. It was published as a companion report to [*Fairness and Freedom: the final report of the Equalities Review*](#), where its influence can be seen in Chapter 2, documenting 'in detail the painstaking struggles of grassroots organisations to gain recognition and make the voice of long-neglected groups heard in the public arena.'

5 Barriers to influencing policy

The History & Policy pilot project has demonstrated that there is an appetite for history in policy circles and for policy involvement among historians. We have experimented with various ways of bringing the two groups together and have been particularly successful at creating *new* spaces where they can meet and exchange views, but we need to do more to encourage historians and policymakers to invite each other into their *own* territory.

Our research and experience has given us a much clearer picture of the barriers to furthering the use of historical knowledge and understanding in policymaking, which we aim to tackle as the project develops:

- Historians' level of skill and experience at working with non-academic audiences;
- The limited time and support available to university-based historians to get involved in 'extra-curricular' activities;
- Lack of recognition for policy engagement within the Research Assessment Exercise;
- Historians' need to identify the policy relevance and impact of their work at the start, rather than the end of research projects;
- Policymakers' reluctance to 'invite historians in' to their networks;



- Policymakers' narrow perception of the role and value of history and historians in the policymaking process;
- The risk that historical research will be exploited for political purposes or used to justify policy courses the historian disagrees with;
- The challenge of forging lasting relationships between individuals or groups of historians and policymakers.

Some of these barriers are illuminated in the following case studies.

Case study: historians' policy and media experience

The History & Policy network was set up in 2007. It is the UK's first expert bank of professional historians who can be mobilised to engage with policymakers and media. The process of recruiting historians to the network provides useful data about their current level of policy and media experience and helps to identify gaps that History & Policy might help to address. Even among this self-selecting group who are keen to contribute to public policy and debate, many have limited policy and media experience. In addition, almost three-quarters of the historians who had joined the network by October 2007 had not yet had media training.

Percentage of historians in the network with media and policy experience:

| | Frequent | Occasional | None |
|---|-----------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Live TV interviews | 7% | 34% | 52% |
| Live radio interviews | 14% | 54% | 26% |
| Interviews with print media | 9% | 46% | 37% |
| Writing articles for print media | 3% | 53% | 36% |
| Interviews or consultancy for documentaries | 6% | 46% | 40% |
| Briefing policymakers | 13% | 30% | 48% |
| Attending policy events | 15% | 30% | 47% |

Source: History & Policy Network, October 2007

Case study: constraints on historians' policy involvement

Historian Mark Roodhouse found that his engagement with policy issues went unrecognised within his academic environment:

“Amongst social scientists a policy paper or written evidence to a parliamentary committee are well respected research outputs. This is not the case amongst historians. My work in this area will go unrecognised in the current Research Assessment Exercise. A policy paper does not fit neatly into the usual categories of academic book or scholarly journal article, and there is no pigeonhole in which to place written evidence to a parliamentary committee. As such, I did not feel that my fellow historians considered engagement with the policy process to be a worthwhile



activity. On the other hand the University Communications Office was enthusiastic and supportive as they recognised the potential for raising my department's profile and regularly handled research-related stories from York's scientists and social scientists."

Historian Abigail Woods found herself at the centre of a media storm after intervening in the debate over official policy on Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in 2001, but did not believe her historical research had any lasting impact on policy:

"Despite intense media interest in the history of FMD during the 2001 epidemic, policymakers seemed totally switched off to the potential value of taking a historical perspective and nothing really came of my involvement in the FMD debate. My student status probably didn't help, though this was counterbalanced by my veterinary qualifications. I think it would have helped to know which policymakers to target and been able to develop some personal relationships. But my experiences were certainly worthwhile - I am firmly convinced of the importance of presenting these perspectives to policymakers and of arguing for the relevance of history to the present.

"My current research project on the history of farm health planning (the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA) strategy for rolling out veterinary preventive medicine on farms) promises improved prospects for policy engagement. It is funded by [The Rural Environment and Land Use Programme \(RELU\)](#), which encourages policy-relevant research and promotes contacts between researchers and policymakers. I anticipate undertaking some work shadowing at DEFRA, and hopefully this will provide the necessary personal connections. But it is worth noting that to my knowledge, I am the only historian to have received a RELU grant; most of its funding is allocated to interdisciplinary collaborative projects involving scientists and social scientists."

Where History & Policy has brokered historians' intervention in policy issues without being 'invited in' by policymakers, we have found there can be a barrier between policymakers' interest in historical research and their willingness to 'think historically' and factor the lessons and arguments of that research into their work. For example, we regularly encourage historians to contribute to parliamentary select committees inquiries and have submitted written evidence on pensions, monetary policy, the NHS, carbon trading and abortion. The case study below shows how this can bring historical research to the committee's attention, but has not so far resulted in historians being called to give oral evidence as other academics often are. We plan to investigate the reasons for this and explore ways in which historians' involvement could be encouraged earlier in the cycle of an inquiry.

Case study: pensions select committee

In June 2006, as part of their efforts to bring historical research to the attention of pensions policymakers, historians Hugh Pemberton, Pat Thane and Noel Whiteside made a written submission to a parliamentary inquiry into pensions reform:



23. By obscuring important differences between the 1942 Beveridge Report and the 1946 National Insurance Act ministers have claimed that their White Paper is 'a new Beveridge'. It is not.

24. Ministers have contrived to give the impression that the White Paper represents 'a new pensions settlement for the twenty-first century' because it embodies the key principles of the Turner Report. It does not.

25. The White Paper is merely the latest instalment in a long series of changes to British pensions that have attempted to mitigate the worst effects of the postwar settlement but almost always made it worse.

26. The White Paper claims to offer working people a better state pension on retirement in the future. It does not.

[*History & Policy memorandum submitted to the Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into Pension Reform*](#), Hugh Pemberton, Pat Thane, Noel Whiteside, June 2006

Although none of the historians were called to give oral evidence, their submission was referenced in the Committee's final report. Had they been able to influence the thinking of the committee at an earlier stage in the inquiry, it is likely that the impact of historical research could have been greater:

"16. When the Secretary of State appeared before us he described the reforms proposed by the Government in its White Paper as "a radical reform and the most important since Beveridge", although this analogy was hotly disputed by three historians from the group 'History and Policy'."

[*Pension Reform*](#), Fourth report of session 2005-06, volume 1, p10

History & Policy is currently developing strategies to overcome these barriers, including:

- Collating case studies of historians with direct experience of policy involvement to identify and disseminate lessons that can be learned and applied in other contexts;
- Establishing a system of history 'knowledge-brokers': experts in their historical field to act as ambassadors for History & Policy in specific policy contexts e.g. trades unions, housing, the NHS etc;
- Pairing historians or groups of historians with policy organisations that already have the ear of government, such as influential NGOs, or with small teams in government departments;
- Exploring the feasibility of carrying out new historical research to address particular policy problems and producing reports that synthesise historical research for a policy audience, modelled on the Equalities Review project;
- Working-up plans for engagement with specific policy audiences, such as parliamentary select committees.



6 The British Academy's role

The British Academy has already played a role in enhancing the impact of historical research in policymaking, by collaborating with History & Policy on several events (see also the pensions book launch case study, above). The access to room space at a prestigious venue close to Whitehall and Parliament has proved invaluable.

Case study: Local democracy workshops

The British Academy has collaborated with History & Policy on a series of three workshops to explore the current state of local democracy and service delivery and how history might enhance policymaking today. The first event, in July 2007, was a panel discussion to explore [*What's wrong with English local democracy? Can looking back help to move it forward?*](#) with a small audience of experts in local government, past and present. Panellists included former Local Government Minister, Nick Raynsford and Local Government Association Chair Lord Bruce-Lockhart as well as historians. A follow-up event to discuss [*Local devolution: a break with the past or return to the past?*](#) took place in November 2007 and panellists included Communities Minister Baroness Andrews, historian and former Minister Baroness Hollis, historian and Local Government Ombudsman Jerry White and *Guardian Public* editor David Walker. Planning is underway for a third event in Birmingham in March 2008 as part of the ESRC's Festival of Social Science.

However, there are ways in which the Academy could further support and develop the role of HSS research in policymaking:

1. Inter-disciplinary learning

Historians could learn from colleagues in the social and political sciences who have more experience of communicating their research to policymakers and of carrying out commissioned research to contribute to specific policy initiatives. The Academy could play a role by regularly bringing together researchers from across the HSS disciplines to share their ideas and experiences. This would involve plugging into existing inter-disciplinary networks in which historians, for example, are already involved.

2. Funding opportunities

The Academy's current funding streams are weighted towards facilitating new research rather than maximising the impact of existing research. This makes it difficult for projects like History & Policy, which involve FBAs and are already working to further the public role of HSS research, to secure funding. The Academy could consider establishing new funding streams that would help support existing projects of this kind, which would also ensure the continued transfer of learning and experience.

3. Rewarding policy engagement

The Academy should be championing the cause of HSS researchers who invest time and effort in policy-related activities and networks. This work currently goes unrecognised in both the majority of universities, in the RAE and its proposed



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replacement. Universities Secretary John Denham was recently quoted in [Times Higher Education](#) as wanting to recognise academics who provide policy advice to Government. However, Mr Denham's comments focus on science and not on HSS research. It is vital that the case is made for the role of HSS research in policymaking – both its current and potential contribution - and the need for this to be recognised within the new research assessment framework. The British Academy would be well placed to take up this role.