



HISTORY & POLICY

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Historian Overturns Haldane Myth

- 'Shock of the Old' Professor welcomes select committee report

Thursday, 23 July, 2009

History Professor David Edgerton has successfully debunked the “invented traditions” that have distorted government science policy for generations, a select committee report published today reveals.

Professor Edgerton of Imperial College London welcomed the report from the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee: *Putting science and engineering at the heart of government policy*, which properly recognises the importance of history in understanding government science policies. He said:

“Our ideas about the progress of British science have been distorted by invented traditions and systematic forgetting. I am delighted that the committee has seriously engaged with history and challenged the myths that have riddled government policy.

“The myth of ‘the Haldane principle’ has been used to give the dignity of antiquity to various policy approaches in the last five decades, but there is no Haldane principle and never has been.

“The Science Minister Lord Drayson has claimed that science policy will drive economic revival, but that is a naïve absurdity. There are good reasons for continuing to support university research in the recession, but the false expectation that it will lead us out of it is not one of them.”

Professor Edgerton’s new History & Policy paper, [*The Haldane principle and other Invented traditions in science policy*](#), is published today laying out his views on the real story of British science policy.

The *Shock of the Old* author:

- Challenges the assumption that Britain has been historically good at inventing, but bad at developing those inventions.

- Exposes as a myth the Haldane Principle', cited by the government as recently as February 2009 to emphasise the role of the research councils under an overarching government strategy;
- Undermines the concept of a direct link between levels of government investment in research, and national economic development.

Notes to editors:

1. Professor David Edgerton's History & Policy paper, [The 'Haldane Principle' and other invented traditions in science policy](#) is published today and is available at: www.historyandpolicy.org. This paper is based on the [Wilkins-Bernal-Medawar Prize Lecture](#), given on 20 April 2009 at the Royal Society.
2. David Edgerton is the Hans Rausing Professor in the Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine at Imperial College London. He is the author of [Shock of the Old: technology and global history since 1900](#) (Profile Books, 2006).
3. The Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee: *Putting science and engineering at the heart of government policy* will be published on Thursday, 23 July 2009.
4. The reference to Lord (Paul) Drayson's comments are based on his article for *The Guardian* on 17th May 2009, see: [Built on brainpower](#).
5. [History & Policy](#) is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history. The initiative was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the [Centre for Contemporary British History](#), at the [Institute of Historical Research](#), University of London. History & Policy is funded through a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.
6. History & Policy has a network of almost 200 historians willing to engage with policymakers and media and now publishes [rapid responses](#) by historians to the news of the day. To sign up for our monthly newsletter, receive press releases or to request an interview with a historian, please contact:

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