



HISTORY & POLICY

Connecting historians, policymakers and the media

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Mel Porter, History & Policy

In a House of Lords debate on history teaching in schools last year, Lord Parekh described the purpose of history as “to tell us who we were, how we came to be what we are, and what options are open to us as we plan our future.” Few would disagree. The role of history teaching in creating a shared view of ‘Britishness’ to answer the questions ‘who are we?’ and ‘how did we come to be here?’ has been much debated by politicians in recent years. But when it comes to Lord Parekh’s third strand, ‘what options are open to us as we plan our future?’, the prevailing view among the policymakers is that history should be left at the school gates. Former Education Secretary Charles Clarke and current Higher Education Minister Bill Rammell are both alleged to have questioned the usefulness of history.

I am going to talk about why history should matter to this specific public: those who discuss and decide public policy in central, devolved and local government and parliaments in the U.K., and those who influence them, particularly the media. I will consider why historians have tended to be excluded from this public and what can be done to change this, in the context of the History & Policy initiative that I am involved in.

It may seem obvious to suggest that those grappling with today's public policy problems might have something to learn from history, but despite the government's claims that its policymaking is 'evidence based' and 'learns the lessons' of past mistakes, rarely does this involve consulting a historian.

This year we are witnessing the nationwide, government-led commemoration of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. It might appear that history has already broken through into the political mindset. And so it has, but in a specific context.

Historians have rightly been involved in the commemoration of this historical milestone. James Walvin from the University of York is on the Deputy Prime Minister's advisory board for the bicentenary, which works to 'galvanise action across the cultural, faith and community sectors'.

But the bicentenary also has current policy implications. The government and other organisations such as the Church of England are under pressure to make apologies and reparations for their involvement in the slave trade.

I would question how far decision-making on these important questions is influenced by a genuine understanding of history, as opposed to current political and public relations pressures. It has been widely remarked upon how the tricentenary of the Act of Union, also this year, has been neglected by comparison.

We are rightly reminded that, as we commemorate 1807, many people worldwide still exist in a state of slavery. But as this quote shows, the role of history in current policy, is that of a mirror to reflect attention back onto problems still to be addressed. It is not seen as a potential tool to inform policy on those issues. I am not questioning the validity of the commemoration activities taking place this year, nor the impact they will hopefully have on this and future generations' understanding of the slave trade and its legacy, but the bicentenary does not represent a milestone in the influence of history over current policymaking.

In my previous communications roles in the Cabinet Office and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, I had first hand experience of, and was sometimes responsible for, the way government creates and deploys history in the presentation of policy. This ranges from the use of descriptions such as 'historic' or 'unprecedented' to describe new policies or initiatives, to explicit references to the glories of Labour governments past, as this slide illustrates, or to 'picking up the pieces' after eighteen years of Conservative mismanagement.

But these references were never, in my experience, based on genuine historical expertise. Virginia Berridge at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine is one of the founding members of History & Policy. She describes the shared assumptions lying behind these statements as 'folk histories', which are latched onto or even created by policymakers. Where they are prevalent and deep-rooted, these folk histories can result in bad policy, because the long-term causes and development of a policy problem are not properly interrogated at the outset.

Once incident I recall was a squabble between the Government and the Opposition over who had created the Green Belt and whether 2005 was actually its 50th anniversary. Was it the Labour government in 1947 or

the Conservatives in 1955? The debate degenerated into a history-free bun-fight with each party claiming ownership of a policy they assumed to be a good thing. The sanctity of the Green Belt has almost as a tight a grip on the public imagination as the NHS, but is it all it's cracked up to be? A historian could have shed light on how, why and when Green Belt came into being and, more importantly, whether it remains an appropriate planning concept for the 21st century. But neither party thought to consult one.

Sometimes history explodes unexpectedly into the policy scene. In 2001 history PhD student Abigail Woods found herself at the centre of a media frenzy about the government's handling of Foot and Mouth Disease. In an article for the Guardian she questioned the historical assumptions behind the slaughter policy, and coverage escalated with headlines such as 'vet slams slaughter'. Virginia Berridge has highlighted the importance of Woods' description in the media as a vet, her former profession, rather than a historian. Even in her original Guardian article she was described as "a vet researching the history of foot and mouth disease". It is questionable whether 'historian slams slaughter would have had quite the same impact. Berridge rightly argues that the media coverage of Woods' criticism made it accessible to policymakers at a

time of 'policy dislocation'. Woods' experience was not an example of a historian being invited to contribute to policy during its formation.

Other academics, such as social and natural scientists and economists, are routinely called on for their expertise during policy analysis and decision-making. Historians have yet to make their presence felt in the policy environment, not just in government, but more widely in Parliament, think-tanks, NGOs, industry and the media coverage that influences these publics. But why?

Historians have not traditionally made themselves or their work accessible to a policy audience, and in the past there has been some resistance to doing so. Virginia Berridge has identified the practical issues to be overcome: "We cannot expect busy policy-makers to lend an ear simply because historians have now decided they need to know. Important variables are timing, language, speaking to the right people... and fitting the political agenda."

History can be inconvenient and embarrassing for politicians. They do not want to know, or be reminded, that their brilliant 'new' policy idea was tried before and failed, or that it was the brainchild of a previous government. They do not want to be told that a current policy problem

actually stems from failures by their treasured forebears, whether Attlee, Wilson or Thatcher. Nor do they want the electorate informed of their own personal histories.

Finally, the belief is prevalent that ‘we all know what happened and why, and if we don’t, we can look it up on Wikipedia’; the past doesn’t need interpreting by historians. One of my colleagues was recently at a meeting with a government minister who was amazed to discover that his civil servants had no collective memory of the 1970s precursors to current policy. But why would they? Like most other professions, the Civil service is no longer replete with old-timers who have served in the same department for 40 years and only a handful of departments have official historians. While secondments to government from think-tanks, campaign groups, charities and academia are now common, I am not aware of any recruited for their historical expertise.

So the onus is on historians to argue for their place at the policy table. The History & Policy initiative aims to help them achieve this. History & Policy is a collaboration between the Universities of London and Cambridge and began life in 2002, with the website, which hopefully some of you are familiar with. The website was established by Alastair Reid at Girton College Cambridge and Simon Szreter at St Johns. They

were later joined by Virginia Berridge, Director of the Centre for History in Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Pat Thane, Director of the Centre for Contemporary British History at the Institute of Historical Research. All four historians had personal experience of engaging with policy audiences and wanted to establish this as a routine, rather than a rare activity for historians generally.

The website is now home to over 50 short policy papers in which historians analyse contemporary issues ranging from ID cards to Iraq and pensions to prostitution. There is a growing community of historians involved and the website is now recognised as a prestigious place to publish and a means to reach a non-academic audience. With the research councils' emphasis on knowledge transfer and public engagement, the advantages to historians are obvious.

With the support of David Bates at the IHR, History & Policy received funding from the Philanthropic Collaborative in the U.S. for a three-year pilot project to actively promote the role of history and historians in policymaking. I joined as full time External Relations Officer in March 2006, tasked with supporting the historians involved to deliver the pilot project and make History & Policy sustainable in the long term. We plan to overcome the practical obstacles to engagement that Virginia

identified in her research: timing, language, speaking to the right people and fitting the political agenda.

We have learned from the experience of the Science Media Centre, which was established in 2002 to improve engagement between scientists and the news media, following an inquiry by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology. Its report on Science and Society, concluded that “the culture of United Kingdom science needs a sea change in favour of open and positive communication with the media”, in order to restore public trust in science. We believe that historians also need to engage in open and positive communication, primarily with policymakers themselves, but also with the media that influence them.

We recognise that for many historians, this is a new venture. For some of the contributors to our website, a History & Policy paper is their first foray into communicating their work to a non-academic audience. We aim to provide the advice and support to enable them to identify and explain the policy relevance of their work, and distil it into a short, accessible format.

Many of the papers on the site have direct policy relevance, and we are now taking a proactive approach to timing their publication and promoting them through the media and events to influence current policy debate. Iain McLean's paper on the Aberfan disaster was published on the day a £2million fund for the town was announced, fulfilling years of campaigning for the restoration of the disaster fund, which research by Iain and Martin Johnes revealed to have been diverted by the Wilson government to pay for the clearing of the coal tip. I was able to arrange Iain an interview on the Today programme, and his comments featured in regional press coverage.

Recently, we published Mark Roodhouse's paper on carbon rationing to coincide with the launch of the government's Climate Change Bill. Mark's willingness to make time for publicity activities and to comment directly on current policy meant I was able to place an article he had written in the Financial Times. The accompanying press release was picked up in the Daily Express, the Guardian and the Sunday Times as part of their coverage of the Climate Change Bill. Mark may not have communicated directly with policymakers, but if the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, well the way to a Minister's is through his or her daily pack of newspaper cuttings.

However, like Abigail Woods', Mark's experience also highlights the risks for any academic communicating through the news media, which tend to take a black-and-white view of research that actually contains many shades of grey. The Express, not surprisingly, was highly critical of his call for a return to the wartime rationing spirit, describing this as 'hysteria' and a 'return to the Dark Ages'. Under the headline 'Green fascists plan to crush your freedoms', their columnist described his work as 'a preposterous outburst'. However Michael White in the Guardian promoted him to the rank of 'learned professor', so it wasn't all bad!

We recognise that not all historians have experience of engaging with the media or with policymakers, who also deal in soundbites and expect clear, crisp communication. We have just set up a groundbreaking new database of historians who are willing to engage with policy and media audiences, modelled on the Science Media Centre's database of scientists. Our database will enable policymakers and journalists to access historians. I am now in the process of recruiting historians, recording their experience and training needs so that I can match them to requests for information and interviews and build confidence gradually.

The benefits to historians include opportunities to contribute to policy and media discussion, publicity for their research and institutions and making

new contacts. Keeping up with the current agenda is essential if historians are to have any influence, so we also aim to keep them informed of developments relevant to their research, so we intend to pilot a policy newsletter for historians on the database. Once the database is well populated with a good spread of expertise across different periods and themes, we plan to launch it to the policy and media world, along with a revamped History & Policy website.

The bigger prize of course is historians' direct involvement with policymaking. This might take the form of written research, either commissioned directly by policymakers or provided spontaneously by historians in response to consultations and inquiries. For instance, we alert historians to parliamentary select committee inquiries and encourage them to get involved. So far, we have facilitated written submissions to inquiries on pensions reform, fiscal policy and patient and public involvement in the NHS.

The recently published Equalities Review, which was commissioned by the Prime Minister and chaired by Trevor Phillips, took a rare but welcome step in choosing to look sixty years back as well as forty years forward. The Review commissioned a team led by Pat Thane at the Centre for Contemporary British History to produce a history of equalities

since 1945. Our report was recently published and you can access it via the History & Policy news page. It fed into the final report of the Equalities Review and will be a valuable resource for the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights when it starts work later this year. We have learned valuable lessons from this experience that we can put into practice as we work to facilitate further historical research for policymakers in future.

We also aim to deliver events bringing together historians and policymakers to discuss current issues. Virginia Berridge's team have a well-established programme of engagement with health policymakers. They recently held a workshop on binge-drinking, with an audience combining historians, other academics and policymakers, including the leader of Westminster City Council.

Last October History & Policy worked with the British Academy to organise the launch of a new book, *Britain's Pensions Crisis: History and Policy*, edited by Hugh Pemberton, Pat Thane and Noel Whiteside. This took the form of a discussion event at Portcullis House in Westminster, hosted by Frank Field MP. We secured a panel including the pensions Minister James Purnell, shadow Minister Nigel Waterson, Financial Times journalist Nick Timmins, John Hills from the LSE, independent pensions expert Ros Altmann and Pat Thane representing the editors, to

debate *Does the Pensions White Paper repeat the mistakes of the past?*.

The audience of 80 included parliamentarians, civil servants and representatives from think tanks, campaign groups, charities and industry.

Later this year or early in 2008, we plan to hold a History & Policy conference to develop our network of historians and showcase our work to potential funders. This will be an opportunity for historians who have published on our website or had direct involvement in policymaking to share their experiences and ideas. We know there are many examples of engagement between historians, policymakers and the media at history departments and research centres around the country and we are keen to expand the History & Policy network and share good practice.

Our core belief is that history, researched to a professional standard, can help shed light on current policy problems - how they arose and how they have been tackled before - and even suggest solutions. Currently, most policymakers operate in a state described by my colleague Simon Szreter as akin to waking “ up each morning with strong impressions of yesterday, less memory of anything that happened last week and only the haziest impressions of anything before that.” I have outlined some of the practical and political reasons why this is the case, but many

historians involved in our initiative, and others, have proved that history can and should have a place at the policy table.

I hope this introduction to History and Policy has been of interest, there is lots more information on our website. Historians interested in getting involved can do so by submitting a paper for consideration or by joining our database. I will be around until Saturday morning if anyone wants to discuss this with me. I'm also happy to hear from people in policy roles who are interested in adding a historical dimension to their work.

Thankyou, now I'm happy to take any questions.