



HISTORY & POLICY

Connecting historians, policymakers and the media

Historical insight can help new government tackle today's toughest policy challenges

- History & Policy marks publication of 100th paper

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The incoming government could solve some of the UK's toughest policy problems with help from historians, according to a new paper published by History & Policy. Challenges ranging from the national debt, to the nuclear deterrent and NHS reform could be approached more effectively if policymakers gained a better understanding of history, the authors argue.

To mark the occasion of publishing its 100th policy paper, H&P has issued a special paper, [*Today's toughest policy problems: how history can help*](#). Alastair J. Reid and Mel Porter draw on some of H&P's previous 99 papers to showcase what historians can bring to today's policy debates. History & Policy (H&P) is an independent initiative involving 250 historians at universities around the UK and aims to improve public policy through a better understanding of history.

Dr Alastair Reid of Girton College, Cambridge, is co-founder of H&P. He said:

"The history of the major policy problems facing the UK today tends to be poorly understood in policymaking circles. On the economy and national debt, people look immediately to the Great Depression, though other episodes could provide more useful insights. NHS and health policymaking is littered with folk histories and misguided assumptions. Social policy is often based on the premise that there were 'golden ages' that can be restored.

"By increasing their historical literacy, politicians, their advisers and civil servants would gain a better understanding of the nature of the problems we face today, and access a wider range of policy ideas and options. The historians involved in H&P stand ready to share their knowledge and ideas with those discussing and deciding policy today; we hope that members of the new government will take up this opportunity to expand their historical horizons."

Mel Porter, of H&P at the Centre for Contemporary British History, University of London, said:

"On all the major issues that will face the new government, historians have something valuable to contribute, even in areas such as climate change where policymakers turn naturally to the sciences. Historians can give insights into when and why policy problems arose, how they have been tackled in the past, what worked, what didn't and why.

"But this does require policymakers to change their mindset, take a longer-term view and abandon their attachment to myths and assumptions about the past. H&P has shown, through 100 papers and an active network of historians, that there is no longer any excuse for policymakers to operate in a historical vacuum or remain ignorant of the past."

Highlights from the paper include:

- Little-known precedents to current economic and fiscal problems, including the 1922 'Geddes Axe' exercise in public spending cuts and the Australian sub-prime mortgage crisis of the 1890s.
- The long history of many supposedly recent phenomena, including 18th century concerns about the power of the Prime Minister and the imposition of central targets to drive up standards in education and Poor Law administration in the late 19th century.
- The surprising effectiveness with which local government previously ran some key services, with a free rein from the state, such as the effective collection of child maintenance from absent fathers under the Old Poor Law and major improvements to living conditions driven by late-19th century municipal governments.
- The innovative role that history can play in climate change policy, including the use of ships' logs to record long-term weather patterns and lessons from wartime rationing and late 19th-century drought controls for policymakers seeking to reduce energy and water consumption today.
- The wealth of unused evidence that was available to US and UK policymakers planning the war on terror and invasion of Iraq, including details of British interrogation techniques – without torture - during the Second World War and lessons learned from intelligence gathering during the Cold War.

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Notes to editors

1. *Today's toughest policy problems: how history can help*, is co-authored by Alastair J. Reid and Mel Porter and is available now on the [History & Policy website](#).
2. Alastair Reid is a co-founder of History & Policy and a Fellow and Director of Studies at Girton College, Cambridge. He is the author of *United We Stand. A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (Penguin, 2005) and *The Tide of Democracy: Shipyard Workers and Social Relations in Britain, 1870-1950* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2010). Mel Porter is H&P's External Relations Manager and a former government communications officer. She is the author of 'Gender identity and sexual orientation' and co-author with Becky Taylor of 'Gypsies and Travellers' in [Unequal Britain: equalities in Great Britain since 1945](#), edited by Pat Thane (Continuum 2010).
3. History & Policy (H&P) is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history, see www.historyandpolicy.org for further details. 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's current work is funded with charitable grants from [Arcadia](#) and [The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#).

4. H&P was founded in May 2002 by Alastair Reid and Simon Szreter and has now published 100 short papers in which historians explore current policy issues; they are all freely available on the website. H&P now supports a [network](#) of around 250 historians, based at UK universities, who are willing and able to engage with current policy discussion.
5. H&P has a dedicated [Election 2010 page](#), where you can find the latest policy papers, rapid responses and opinion articles by historians. Over the next few weeks, H&P will be publishing more policy papers with fresh insights into major policy issues.
6. You can [sign up on our website](#) to receive H&P's monthly newsletter. To receive our latest news as it happens, you can follow 'HistoryPolicy' on [Twitter](#) or contact the office to receive email updates.
7. For further information or to request an interview with a historian, please contact:
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