



# HISTORY & POLICY

Connecting historians, policymakers and the media

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### **Time to talk**

*Dr Simon Szreter on a new initiative by professional historians to offer past perspectives on contemporary issues.*

What would it be like if you woke up each morning with no memory of your life to that point? Impossible. You just couldn't function, of course.

But what if you woke 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 - quite unsure of whether you were recalling events and actual persons you had met or just dreams and fantasies?

I am not describing a medical condition but - with a little poetic licence - the normal state of politics and policy-making in our western democracies today. Of course, top politicians have always been under immense and urgent pressure from a multitude of competing claims on their attention, which means they have to devote most of their energy to today and tomorrow. This has become a particularly marked obsession with new Labour, for whom the term "spin" has been coined to describe a government whose first priority is itself widely perceived as being the management of today's and tomorrow's image in the media.

Politicians and their advisers today are also wary of being associated with the past because they like nothing better than portraying themselves as offering something fresh and new. The world is changing so fast, what possible use can it be to harp on about the past?

Our collective memory of the past is far too valuable a resource to be ignored. And, like it or not, we act on its promptings all the time. Historians themselves, as interpreters of the past, have perhaps acquiesced too easily in such hoary old half-truths as "history never repeats itself". For it is a greater truth that those who forget the lessons of history are destined to repeat their predecessors' mistakes.

The Alder Hey scandal over body parts has many historical precedents and reflects institutional failure by the medical profession to take those to heart. A parlous state of local government, as today, was dramatically turned round once before in our recent past - how? Just how centralised has government become in Britain today - are we a pluralist society still? Only history can provide the relevant perspectives and insights to answer these questions.

Ministers may be understandably hard-pressed to find the time to listen to historians. They deal with a baffling range of responsibilities for decisions over many complex matters. But they work with a bevy of advisers and are surrounded by civil servants and a penumbra of thinktanks. And, of course, serious journalists might also be expected to have an interest in what historians have to say.

Accurate and rich memories give us the option for making a more careful and well-informed judgement about today's issues.

It is to assist the policy-making process that a new initiative has been launched this week by professional historians. History and Policy is not another thinktank, it is a website and seminar series that will offer historical perspectives on contemporary issues. Many of the papers that will appear on the website will first be presented in person at a regular seminar series in London, where historians and policy-makers will be able to meet in person.

This is a joint initiative by Cambridge University history faculty and the Institute for Contemporary British History, housed in the Institute of Historical Research at the Senate House, London University. Through this forum, expert historians from all over the country and from abroad will contribute to the dialogue with policy makers.

History and Policy kick-offs today, with a major launch event on the highly topical subject of public finance. Historians will present policy papers on national taxation, local government and health service funding. These historical presentations will be commented on by leading policy specialists in each field - Andrew Dilnot, Tony Travers and Julian Le Grand, respectively.

The first clutch of policy papers will be on the website from today. As well as local government revival and Alder Hey, they include, for instance, articles on food safety and animal health, the work/life balance in an ageing society, and on world trade and world disease.

It is a particular feature of the papers on offer that they do not simply berate policy-advisers with accounts of the complexity of the past and with tales of woe. Each paper contains specific and constructive proposals for today's concerned policy-makers to think about. The aim is to provide informed dialogue with the past, not to attempt to dictate from the past. The forum is an opportunity for policy-makers to exercise, interrogate and improve their memories.

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