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17. History and Public Policy

Simon Szreter (University of Cambridge)

Why history and policy?

History can be studied in many ways and for many reasons, including the sheer pleasure of learning about other times, people and places for their own sake. One of the values of history in a liberal democracy can be to inform the deliberative process of policymaking (Tosh 2008). However, busy policymakers, immersed in the advice proffered by economists, sociologists, psychologists and medical professionals, while also keeping an eye on the electoral weather vane, will not have the time, even if they did have the inclination, to become regular readers of academic history.

Historians can grumble among themselves about this absence of genuine historical 'literacy' among the governing class and lament the general lack of a critically informed historical perspective among opinion-formers and political figures. But are they entitled to do so? If I do nothing to make the fruit of my historical research available and accessible to those working in the contemporary arena of policy discussion and formulation, who is at fault? The challenge for historians is therefore twofold. Firstly, it is in communicating the value of history to a policy audience, then, if this value is accepted, to persuade policymakers to listen to and act on these historical insights.

In the UK there has been an almost complete absence of any institutionalized vehicle for the communication of historians' research to this important audience. Apart from the possibility of occasional features in the broadsheets, there has been no recognized outlet for publicizing the fruits of historical research to reach this audience. There is consequently a considerable gap between, on the one hand, the monograph or the journal article and, on the other hand, the 'popularization' or 'public history' of the television series, with the student textbook as the only other standard product available.

None of these media are designed to bring historians' specialized research specifically to the attention of the policy community and none of these are of much help to the time-pressured policy advisers and policymakers who require focused historical knowledge. By presenting history in an accessible form in the public forum where policy is debated, historians can also provide an introduction to historical perspectives on current political problems and examples of historicist ways of thinking about causation, evidence, context and process in human affairs. This will provide a healthy counter-weight to the preponderance of largely unhistorical theories, models and projections that characterize the kind of policy advice offered by other influential disciplines. This represents the rationale behind 'History and Policy' (History and Policy 2010).

What is History and Policy?

History and Policy began as a website in 2002, edited by two historians at Cambridge University, myself and Alastair Reid. We publish short, accessible articles aimed at non-historians, summarizing and drawing out the contemporary policy implications of high quality, recent, historical research. In 2006, a History and Policy external relations office was established in the Centre for Contemporary British History at the Institute of Historical Research, with initial funding from the US-based Philanthropic Collaborative and a second phase of funding from Arcadia and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

Since its initial launch History and Policy has become a growing partnership and an expanding network. The network comprises, on the one hand, an increasing number of historians (over 250 by February 2010) who have agreed to make themselves and their expertise available for consultation by policymakers and the media. For instance, following the publication of his History and Policy paper on 'Rationing returns: a solution to global warming?' (Roodhouse 2007) and associated publicity in the press, Mark Roodhouse of the University of York was invited to submit a memorandum to the Environmental Audit Select Committee inquiry into personal carbon allowances.

The complementary half of the network comprises individuals working in the print, news, radio and television media, in Parliament and the civil service, in think-tanks and NGOs, who wish to be kept in touch with the publications appearing on the website and the increasing range of History and Policy events, seminars and conferences, organized to engage audiences from the policy world with historians. Our first such event was a debate on pensions policy held within the House of Commons, chaired by Frank Field and attended by James Purnell MP, then Minister of State for Pensions Reform and Nigel Waterson MP, his Conservative shadow (Pemberton *et al.* 2006). History and Policy's official launch in December 2007 was another event of this kind. It took place at the Churchill War Cabinet Museum in Whitehall under the title 'Why Policy Needs History' with an audience of over 140 academics, politicians, civil servants, journalists and members of think-tanks and charities. The event stimulated widespread public discussion and media coverage in *The Times*, *Guardian* and *Independent*, as well as interviews on television and BBC Radio 4's 'Today' and 'Start the Week' programmes.¹

However, reading or hearing a new argument once is unlikely to be enough to change deeply entrenched ideas about the present and assumptions about the past. In most fields of activity regular interaction and gradual familiarization with new ideas is usually required to bring about a real transformation of understanding. So, the History and Policy project involves not just the introduction of new information about the past as a background to the present, but a new way of using the past to think about the present,

opening up policy possibilities which may have previously been unthinkable or simply invisible.

It therefore seemed worth exploring the potential of setting up an ongoing 'policy forum' bringing together small numbers of key practitioners with relevant historical experts to see what would emerge from a series of regular discussions. We expected that such interactions would not be one-way streets, but that the scholars involved would also be learning from the practitioners' accounts of their experience and from observing their responses to different types of historical argument.

The group chosen was trade unionists as my colleague Alastair Reid had recently published a general survey in this field and come into contact with James Moher, a legal official with a history PhD and a long track record of experience in different types of unions. The Trade Union Forum has now met several times, with sessions re-examining postwar collective bargaining, the issue of trade union political funding (marking the anniversary of the landmark 1909 Osborne Judgement) and apprenticeships. It is clear that there is an appetite for this sort of discussion among the target group but also that it will take time to build up an effective mix of historians and practitioners, to create an atmosphere of familiarity and trust, and to establish a shared framework of historical and intellectual reference points resilient enough to permit the exploration of new ideas. But there is no good reason to expect that making a constructive impact on public life should be any quicker or more straightforward than carrying out fundamental research or engaging in high quality teaching and learning.

The History and Policy website has also been redesigned and relaunched to make it more useful and accessible to its users. At the time of writing there are almost 100 policy papers classified into 20 searchable categories ranging from 'Climate change and environment' to 'Families and children', 'Economy, taxation and finance' and 'International affairs and security'. History and Policy also works with the BBC journalist Chris Bowlby to publish a monthly feature on topical issues in *BBC History Magazine*. Recent articles in the series have included: 'Have we lost the spirit of the Hustings?' (Bowlby 2010) and 'Did we ever have trust in our MPs?' (Bowlby 2009). The website also features shorter opinion articles and 'rapid responses', both of which encourage and allow historians to react quickly to topical events such as the Budget or the Queen's Speech. History and Policy has also run a myth-busting 'Bad History' feature, modelled on Ben Goldacre's influential 'Bad Science' columns in the *Guardian*, in partnership with *Times Higher Education* (Reisz 2009). All our activity is promoted through the monthly newsletter and on Twitter.

What is intellectually distinctive about the History and Policy initiative is its ambition to bring to the notice of policymakers and the wider public an understanding of the implications for contemporary public policy discourse of any and all kinds of historical research and of the historical perspective.

It is *not* therefore a vehicle for research exclusively on 'policy history', the history of previous government policies in various branches of government, a subfield of history already addressed by the *Journal of Policy History*. Nor is it a body attempting to promote narrowly conceived, instrumental, policy-relevant research in history, with all its attendant un-historicist problems of presentism, anachronism, teleology and selectivity.

The History and Policy initiative is run by and for professional historians and shares with them the premise that valuable history is based on research that has attempted to engage with the records and texts of the past on their own terms. Having done the painstaking historical research, we believe that the fruits of historians' labours merit being shared more widely. Historians generate important new knowledge and challenging, often disconcerting insights, which can change perceptions of the nature of current policy issues and expand the imagination of today's policymakers. Without this, the policy process can remain trapped by unexamined and misleading assumptions about the present and how it came to be. Policies for change in the future are much more likely to bring about their intended outcomes if formulated on the basis of an informed, open and critical perspective on the past.

The value of History and Policy

The strongest general argument both for the importance of bringing history into dialogue with policy and policymaking and for historians to take it as their social duty to bring about this expansion in contemporary public discourse is that history is already there, all the time, in the policy formulating process. The only question is what *kind* of history is going to be used by decision-makers?

Without the explicit input of critical and reflective professional historians, the 'history' which policymakers use is likely to be naive, simplistic and implicit, often derived from unconscious assumptions or vague memories from lessons in school. As such, it is likely to be highly selective, to be used to suit predetermined purposes and to be largely unverified. The (ab)use of history in this form not only represents a problem of commission but also of omission, in that it both invokes 'bad' history and denies the policy process the vast reservoir of imaginative and critical resources available from contemporary historical research.

In 2007 Virginia Berridge carried out a study, funded by History and Policy, into the current use of history by policy advisers and decision-makers in the health policy field. Her conclusions deserve to be cited in full:

My interviews reveal just this; that history is being used in an ad hoc way, mostly without the involvement of historians. Historians are mainly seen as providers of the raw materials for analysis. Policy makers like to use history but they do not usually see historians or historical

interpretation as a necessary part of the frame. There is little knowledge of the interpretative role of history, and views of history are dominated, in the view of historians, by out-of-date perceptions or by mistaken views of personalities and 'great men'. Invoking Nye Bevan is a cottage industry among health ministers.

Despite the presence in the current [2007] government of many historically-trained ministers, including a prime minister in-waiting [sic] with a history PhD, the use of history as a tool to make better public policy is currently under-developed. In the health field, the past is mined for historical clichés to support current policies. The repetition of NHS folk histories has become a cottage industry among health ministers, while expert historians are excluded from policy discussion and the insights they could offer are wasted. (Berridge 2008)

Professor Berridge's interviewees identified social scientists in policy positions and politicians with historical backgrounds as potential 'history brokers'. But, despite recognizing the value of history in policymaking, many operate in a historian-free environment, relying instead on 'folk histories' to interpret the past and inform decisions in the present.

The policy world uses history all the time but it tends to be a highly selective, convenient and amateur kind. Am I, as a historian, happy to stand by and allow the use of 'folk histories' to continue? Policymakers like to invoke history for their own convenience, often using history without actually consulting historians. The point of the History and Policy network is to deny that option by providing an alternative. Historians have no right to complain about this state of affairs unless they make the effort to promote a more discerning and up-to-date awareness among policymakers of the findings of current historical research and its understanding of context, process and difference.

The purpose of History and Policy is to facilitate this. Apart from bringing pertinent historical evidence to public attention, and challenging comfortable and convenient myths about the past, fighting for a wider public hearing for the discipline of history brings with it several methodological precepts about 'thinking in time' or 'thinking with history', which are of value to those contemplating policy interventions (Neustadt and May 1986; Schorske 1998).

As John Tosh has clearly formulated in his recent exposition of the philosophy of 'critical applied history' or 'practical historicism', which underpins the History and Policy initiative, these are constituted by the profound respect which all good historical research gives to three methodological issues: questions of context, the study of process, and questions of difference when addressing human and social affairs (Tosh 2008: 36–46; Tosh 2002: 9–12). To these we would add of course the discipline's high level of critical sensitivity to the provenance of information

of all kinds and its commitment to a self-critical, reflective awareness of the historian's own time and place – though it is fair to point out that the discourse of public policymaking probably has rather less time and attention available for pursuing in depth these more epistemological issues. However, it is certainly enough of an achievement to be going on with, and a substantial one at that, if historians can contribute to a heightened awareness among the political class of the importance of Tosh's three historical precepts of context, process and difference.

For example, policymakers are subjected to a plethora of forms of knowledge from the economics, management and policy science fields, which appear to be able to predict in advance specified outcomes (policy goals and their 'targets'), regardless of local contexts, and which purport to be sufficiently 'scientific' and powerful as to be relied upon for guidance by decision-making funders, officials and ministers so they can set targets and deadlines for policy delivery. Yet this creates a self-defeating problem. Such forms of context-free policy science promise interventions which will supposedly negotiate the process of change without unforeseen consequences and reactions.

They are, therefore, severely handicapped as detailed guides to practical action because policies of any kind have to be applied in particular contexts with their specific local conditions and history. Yet the differences of specific times and places from each other and from the mental universes of the policy-planners – all of this 'messy' detail of historical context and difference – have been excluded by design from such abstracted, 'scientific' policy models. History provides a way of thinking about society and its component parts, about the messy, conflicted and negotiated process of change and about the differences between perspectives of different agents, a disposition which potentially can assist in the field of policy formulation and implementation.

There can be an assumption that scientists provide objective, factual advice and that they all agree. Yet, as David Edgerton has demonstrated, even the government's science policy is itself based on erroneous historical assumptions. In presenting oral evidence to the Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills (arranged by History and Policy and the Arts & Humanities Research Council), Professor Edgerton debunked 'invented traditions' such as the 'Haldane Principle' that have distorted science policy for generations, and succeeded in bringing history into the frame of understanding government science policies (Edgerton 2009; House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee 2009a; House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee 2009b). The findings of science have no more intrinsic 'objective value' to policymakers and politicians than those of the social sciences and humanities. This became particularly clear with the controversial sacking in October 2009 of Professor David Nutt as the Government's Chief Adviser

on drugs policy, sparking a debate about the tensions between academic freedom and the role of official government advisers. Home Secretary Alan Johnson insisted that: 'Professor Nutt was not sacked for his [scientific] views, which I respect but disagree with. He was asked to go because he cannot be both a government adviser and a campaigner against government policy' (Jones and Booth 2009).

In addition to the methodological lessons of paying attention to context, process and difference, and to the debunking of convenient but misleading myths, history can also offer policymakers imagination and inspiration. Historians are not just naysayers and the counsel of complications. Historians themselves can too easily overlook the extent to which certain aspects of the past, which are familiar or even mundane to the historical specialist, can strike those facing policy problems in the present with remarkable power as a novel insight.

Indeed, what is novel and inspiring to contemporary policymakers about a period in the past may have been known for some time to historians. In order to effectively purvey their historical knowledge to the policy arena, it is important for historians to keep a weather-eye on the contemporary world and the issues being addressed in the media. As Professor Berridge's work revealed, it often helps if historians have personal or professional contacts within the relevant policy networks, but also with academics of other disciplines who are already active in the policy arena, and it also helps if they occasionally seek to publish in the academic journals which serve these disciplines. The following case study from my own experience illustrates this relationship perfectly.

From history to policy: an example

As a lecturer in British eighteenth-century social and economic history, the Elizabethan parish-based Poor Law features in my teaching. An important comparative article published in the specialist journal, the *Economic History Review*, by Peter Solar in 1995 had brought to the collective attention of the British historical profession the unusual nature of the English Poor Law's universality of provision. By the mid-seventeenth century it covered not only the urban poor, as found in many other parts of Europe, but also all the poor in every rural parish as well (Solar 1995). Solar argued that the development of this precocious, universalist social security system could have played a significant role in contributing to England's rapidly rising agricultural productivity and associated urbanization during the two centuries following its statutory creation by Elizabeth I.

I had long idly wondered about England's system of extensive parish registers and why they had been so assiduously kept and preserved that enough of them had survived for the Cambridge Group for the History of Population to mount its extraordinary exercise of historical demographic reconstruction in the 1970s and 1980s. Solar's article helpfully suggested to

me a possible inter-relationship between these two institutions. After some further research on this, in 2007 I published an article in the policy-oriented journal, *World Development*, which primarily aimed to bring a historical perspective to bear on the contemporary issue of the scandalous neglect, from a human rights perspective, of identity registration at birth among around 36 per cent of the children born today in the world's poorest countries (Szreter 2007). My historical contribution was to point out how the citizens of England, the world's first successful 'developed' economy, had long benefited both from a universal identity registration system (the parish registers from 1538 onwards) and a universal social security system (the 'Old' Poor Law, 1601–1834), as precursors to economic development. This publication then generated at least two further significant policy-related consequences.

Firstly, I was asked to join a large team of public health epidemiologists and social scientists who were writing a commissioned set of articles on the current neglect of civic registration in the world's poor countries. They did not have a historian on the team and the *World Development* article drew their attention to the potential significance of incorporating a historical perspective into their work on this contemporary policy issue. I found that one of my main contributions was to counsel extreme care in advocating the creation of new identity registration systems in the world's poorest countries because they could be open to tragic abuse by maverick political regimes – as in Rwanda in the 1990s and Nazi Germany – and must be designed with this risk in mind.

The team's work has borne fruit in a set of four articles in the *Lancet's* online publication ('Who Counts'). This publication has, in turn, been extensively cited in the final Report of the World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, chaired by Sir Michael Marmot, which included the admonitory statement that, 'Improving civil registration systems requires the trust and participation of citizens. Their privacy needs to be protected through functioning data protection systems. Individuals, in particular vulnerable groups, should be protected from abuse of civil registration by governments and others' (Commission on Social Determinants of Health 2008).

Secondly, I was asked by the organizers to speak at the 'Social Protection for the Poorest in Africa' conference, sponsored by the UK Department for International Development (DfID), in Entebbe, Uganda. This addressed the practical problems of constructing social security systems in sub-Saharan Africa. Clearly this is a long way from the 'comfort zone' of an historian of modern Britain! However, what the conference organizers wanted from me as the lone historian was a tale of inspiration for an audience of hard-bitten contemporary social practitioners and decision-makers (including one of Uganda's Treasury ministers, who was going to take a lot of persuading that money should be spent on welfare support for the poor rather than on 'productive' investment in roads, hospitals, schools, etc).

Many in the audience, which included policymakers and practitioners from across the developing world, had no detailed knowledge of the historic English Poor Law; some had never heard of it. Their main focus of activity was to contemplate and discuss the mountain they would be attempting to scale over the coming years and decades, firstly in trying to convince politicians and donors to implement ambitious and costly schemes of social protection among the world's poorest, and secondly in getting to grips with very difficult practical problems such as developing systems for cash-payments to HIV-AIDS depleted households, sometimes headed by young children.

They told me that what they found helpful and inspirational in my presentation was simply the fact that history showed that complex, large-scale welfare systems were not solely the property of rich nations, the luxurious fruit of achieved development. In a country such as early seventeenth-century England – which had been as poor in per capita GDP terms as sub-Saharan African countries today, which had literacy rates way below even those of the poorest African countries today, which had been riven with religious division for decades and even open civil war – it had nevertheless been possible to construct and maintain a fully functioning, universal social security system and associated identity registration system.

For all historians of modern and early modern England, these historical facts are nothing new and to reiterate them would not hold the attention of an audience at a professional early modern history conference. But for my audience in Entebbe this was highly significant, new information. The detailed history of the Old Poor Law and its locally diverse *modi operandi* are, of course, the subject of lively and ongoing historical scholarship and debate.² This, too, can offer some stimulating analogies and insights to contemporary policy planners and implementers operating in the entirely distinct context of Africa today, though of course nobody would want to claim that the practicalities of Poor Law administration in England's early modern past can provide any precise template for practical and specific guidance. However, what is much more important to the policy practitioners in Africa today is simply to know of the elemental and undisputed fact of the old Poor Law's widespread existence in a 'poor' society and to ponder the pregnant fact that it long pre-dated modern economic development and infrastructure.

Since the conference I have continued to remain actively involved in international development policy. I have recently given several invited presentations on the history of civil registration and social protection in England, including to the Overseas Development Institute, Institute of Development Studies and DfID. My most recent session at DfID was praised by the Permanent Secretary, Dr Nemat Shafik as 'a good opportunity to look back to our own history and see how a social safety net was created in England when the country had a low-income agrarian economy, not unlike the countries [DfID] works with today'.

Conclusions

The historian's knowledge and the historicist perspectives are valuable precisely because they provide different and challenging intellectual resources to those available from other disciplines. As exemplified here in the case of contemporary civic registration policies, historical research and the historicist approach can – and should – provide policy practitioners, advisors and decision-makers with equal measures of both admonition and inspiration. History and Policy provides the channel through which academics can purposefully present their historical research in relation to a current policy area.

This transfer of knowledge is not just one-way. The practice of studying history is of course a two-way dialogue between past and present. History and Policy believes that it can only be helpful for historians to be as critically well-informed as possible about those aspects of the present which most preoccupy the policy world. The organization keeps network members updated with policy debates, particularly those which could benefit from historical reassessment. Historians are regularly asked to contribute to these debates, reinforcing the relevance of this two-way dialogue to both parties.

History and Policy has just completed an evaluation of its services amongst its network of professional historians. All of those interviewed believed that a source of support to link historians and policymakers was probably or definitely important and 93 per cent said the need for an organization like History and Policy was probably or definitely increasing.³

Some network members believed History and Policy was important because the organization, by its very existence, reinforced the importance of history to policymaking and justified the attempts of historians to become more involved. Further, History and Policy was credited with actually impacting on policy – several network members talked about their research being incorporated into policy debates. Others talked about the need for historians to dispel self-serving myths and assumptions about the past, used in misleading or simplistic ways to justify current policies, and to show how policy 'disasters' happened in the past to forewarn those at risk of taking a similar path in the present.

The most glaring, recent example of policymakers' failure to learn from history remains the Iraq War, on which Tony Blair confidently pronounced in his speech to the US Congress that, 'There has never been a time ... when, except in the most general sense, a study of history provides so little instruction for our present day' (Blair 2003). History and Policy is proud to record that in spring 2003 it published two papers which, in retrospect, were prescient in their warnings about the coalition's unrealistic approaches to winning the peace in Iraq (Dower 2003; Milton-Edwards 2003). These are among the most powerful papers on the History and Policy website, not because the authors adopted a radical political line, but

simply because of their insistence on presenting a clear and full historical account to cross-examine current policies.

This chapter began by agreeing that history is valuable on its own terms and can be studied in various different ways, including for the sheer pleasure of learning about different times, people and places. This remains true, but the value of History and Policy also lies in its role as an established, independent channel through which to present accessible policy-relevant historical insights. History and Policy enables academics in the humanities to share more widely the value of their hard-won findings and insights, and those in the policy world genuinely interested in open debate to enhance their intellectual resources to deal with the very difficult problems they face.

In its relatively short lifespan, History and Policy has become an increasingly important forum for communication between historians and the policy world and both the AHRC and British Academy have cited History and Policy as an example of best practice in this respect. In 2009, Baroness Onora O'Neill, former President of the British Academy, highlighted History and Policy in her oral evidence to a parliamentary select committee saying, 'it would often be extremely useful if those who know what worked and what did not work in the quite recent past were there to say, "By the way, you tried this in 2002 and you gave it up for the following reasons"' (O'Neill 2009). Or, indeed, in 1902, or 1802 or even earlier! However, there is a long way to go before History and Policy achieves the kind of profile and acknowledged status enjoyed by some longer-established, policy-facing institutions. At the time of founding History and Policy with Alastair Reid I thought that the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) provided an excellent example for long-term institutional emulation. While the field of historical knowledge is of course much more diverse and no less contested than the politics of taxation, the IFS showed that it was possible to establish a position of publicly respected authority and maintain a reputation for political impartiality and the highest professional standards. We have also quickly learned that the skills and energy of communications specialists are as vital to the effectiveness of this project in reaching its target audience in the policy world as the website with its high quality papers written by our historians. I still view History and Policy as a venture that is in youthful growth and expansion, though perhaps no longer in its infancy.

Notes

- 1 For details of media coverage, see 'Why Policy Needs History' at <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/newsarchive/index.html#practice>.
- 2 Solar's article stimulated debate with Steve King: King (1997); Solar 1997; King 2000. Other recent major historical studies of various aspects of the Old Poor Law have included: Taylor 1989; Lees (1998); Slack (1998); Sokoll, (2001); Hindle (2004). For a stimulating recent contribution, written with a contemporary policy audience in mind see Smith (Smith 2008).

- 3 Evaluation interviews with random sample of historians in the History and Policy Network, December 2009–February 2010; a summary of findings was published at <http://www.historyandpolicy.org> in spring 2010.

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