



postnote

January 2009 Number 323

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

In the past decade, the government has repeatedly emphasised the importance of taking an “evidence-based” approach to policy-making. In 2006, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee welcomed the government’s progress in integrating scientific evidence into decision making. However, despite increasing use of evidence from the natural and social sciences, evidence from humanities disciplines such as history is not widely used. This POSTnote considers how history could help to inform decisions on key scientific and technological policy issues.

Background

Why Use History in Policy-Making?

The potential benefits of using history can range from providing the general context and background to current policy problems, to drawing specific lessons from past cases. Some of the possible ways in which history could be used to inform policy are outlined below.

Historical Analogies

Today’s policy-makers can learn useful lessons from historical cases. They can use history to draw on past successes and avoid repeating past mistakes. This can be the case even for apparently very different cases such as the BSE crisis of the 1990s and the more recent controversies over the MMR vaccine or GM foods. As noted in the Phillips report into BSE in 2000, the BSE crisis demonstrated the need to be open about risk and uncertainty when providing scientific advice to the public. Such lessons are important for the handling of present and future cases where there may be public concern about risks to health.

New Perspectives on Current Policy Problems

From today’s perspective, past decisions or developments sometimes appear to have been inevitable. This can be especially true of scientific and technological policy issues, in which development is often perceived to follow a fixed trajectory. Historical analysis can look at the factors behind past policy choices and show that other options were available at the time.

Box 1. Case Study: Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD)

Foot and mouth disease (FMD) first appeared in Britain in 1839, and the government began to introduce measures to control its spread in the late 19th century. Slaughter became official state policy from the early 1920s, and between 1922 and 1924 around 250,000 animals were slaughtered in two epidemics. During the 1967/8 epidemic, more than 2300 farms were affected by the disease, and more than 400,000 animals were slaughtered.¹

The FMD outbreak of 2001 cost the country more than £8 billion and led to the slaughter of millions of animals. The 2002 Anderson report on the handling of the outbreak opened with the comment: “We seem destined to repeat the mistakes of history”. It suggested that the government had failed to learn some of the lessons of the previous FMD outbreak in 1967, particularly the need for preparation and the importance of rapid action.

A key issue during the 2001 epidemic was whether to use emergency vaccination as well as slaughter to control the disease. Historian Abigail Woods became involved in the media debate over the issue in 2001. Her research into the origins of British FMD policy revealed that FMD had been seen as a mild disease until stricter government control measures were used during the 19th century, causing FMD to be linked with severe economic consequences. This perception helped to justify the introduction of slaughter as a control measure in the early 20th century. Although protective vaccination became increasingly popular within Europe during the 20th century, from the 1950s Britain promoted its FMD control policy abroad and from 1989, other European countries adopted the slaughter policy. By 2001, slaughter was taken for granted as the correct way to control an FMD outbreak.²

Woods’ research questioned this view of the slaughter policy by showing that there was nothing inevitable about the decision to control FMD using slaughter. By showing that other options had been considered in the past, Woods’ research helped to challenge a policy which had prevailed for almost a century, and her work contributed to a growing critique of the slaughter policy. The Anderson report concluded that vaccination should be an option in any future outbreak of the disease.

This can help policy-makers question accepted policy solutions and can open up more options for dealing with current policy problems. Box 1 shows how historical

research provided a new perspective on government policies for controlling foot and mouth disease (FMD).

The origins of current problems can also be better understood by taking a longer view of their history. For example, the controversy surrounding the MMR vaccine is often explained as a problem of media hysteria and public confusion about science. However, research has shown that Britain has a long history of opposition to vaccination programmes, dating back to the late 19th century. Government vaccination programmes have historically raised questions about the balance between public health and personal freedoms.³ Understanding this history can give a better understanding of the hostility of some sections of the public to the MMR vaccine and help to inform the implementation of future vaccination policies.

Challenging Assumptions and Correcting Misconceptions

Understanding of history partly shapes understanding of the present. Historical research can help to dispel myths or popular misconceptions about the past to ensure that current policy is based on an informed understanding rather than inaccurate assumptions. For example, historians have suggested that the standard view of the history of technology has led to policy-makers focussing too much on a few “disruptive” or “revolutionary” technologies while overlooking the potential benefits of more “mundane” technologies (see Box 2).

Box 2. Case Study: Disruptive Technologies

The term “disruptive technology” was coined in 1995 by Professor Clayton M. Christensen to describe new, initially inferior, technologies which unexpectedly displace established technologies. The term has since begun to be used more widely to refer to any “revolutionary” technology which replaces (or may in future replace) another, especially one with the potential to cause far-reaching changes to society or the economy. For example, the 2002 White Paper *Investing in Innovation* identified nanotechnology as a “disruptive technology”, predicting it would “redefine our lifestyles” and make current products redundant.

Standard accounts of past developments often focus on a few key technologies that “changed the world”, such as electricity, nuclear energy or the microprocessor. Many historians of technology have argued that this is a simplistic and misleading view, and some suggest that it has led governments to overemphasise the importance of “revolutionary” technologies such as nanotechnology. History can help to dispel some of the myths or misconceptions about technological development and provide a more realistic picture of the development and impact of new technologies. Many “revolutionary” technologies have been predicted to displace more mundane technologies, but have failed to do so. For example, paper remains indispensable despite the advent of electronic communication. Similarly, there has been a move back to old tram and light rail systems which it was once thought were obsolete in a new economy based on private car ownership.⁴

Evaluation of Policy Outcomes

History can help to assess whether policies are achieving the desired outcomes. For example, it shows that the relationship between national innovation and economic growth is not as straightforward as current policy assumes. The government’s ten-year Science and

Innovation Investment framework, outlined in 2004, stated that “harnessing innovation in Britain is key to improving the country’s future wealth creation prospects” and pledged to increase R&D spending as a percentage of GDP. Yet history suggests that the picture is more complicated than this. For example, in the 1950s Britain spent more on R&D than Japan and yet grew more slowly. History can help to provide a more realistic picture of how innovations come about and their impact on the national economy.⁵

Policy Implementation

As well as helping policy-makers to decide on a policy, historical research can help to put policies into practice. While specific circumstances will never be identical, historical cases can help to identify effective strategies for presenting policies to the public and to avoid problems which have caused policy failures in the past.

Limitations of History

Although historical analogies can be useful, it is important to be aware of differences as well as similarities between cases, and to avoid making crude or superficial analogies with the past. For example, David King, then government Chief Scientific Adviser, has noted that during the 2001 FMD outbreak, officials simply “dusted over” the lessons from the 1967 outbreak and applied them without taking into account changes in farming practice. In particular, in 2001, increased movement of animals around the country contributed to the wide dispersal of FMD before it was identified. This had been a feature of earlier FMD outbreaks, including a serious one in 1922, but was not identified by studying the lessons from 1967.

Historical Evidence and Policy-Making

Evidence-Based Policy

Since the 1990s “evidence-based policy” has become a central part of public policy discourse. The 1999 White Paper *Modernising Government* emphasised the need to make better use of evidence and research in policy making, while the 1999 Cabinet Office report *Professional Policy Making for the 21st Century* identified “using evidence” as one of nine “core competencies” for modern policy making.

Although there is a danger that the role of evidence in policy-making can be overplayed, as explained in Box 3, in general policymakers and researchers have welcomed the move to an “evidence-based” model. In the past decade, the government has taken a number of steps towards improving the use of evidence in policy-making. Key developments are outlined below.

Scientific Advice

The controversy over BSE in the mid-1990s, and the subsequent Philips Report on the handling of the crisis, highlighted the need for an effective system of scientific advice to government. Guidelines issued in 2000 by the then Office of Science and Technology (OST) emphasised the need to obtain scientific advice from sources both internal and external to the government, as well as across a range of scientific disciplines.

Since 2002, Chief Scientific Advisers (CSAs) have been appointed to most government departments to help to

ensure a sound scientific evidence base for policy making and to guide the direction of their departments' research activities. Departments also now conduct reviews of their use of science to help to identify best practice.

Box 3. Limitations of Evidence-Based Policy

Most policy makers and researchers acknowledge that policy should be informed by evidence. However, some have pointed out that too great an emphasis on the "evidence-based policy" model can cause problems. The most commonly raised issues are outlined below.

- A solid evidence base on which to build policy rarely exists. Even the best evidence will contain uncertainties, and knowledge can change over time. Furthermore, the same evidence can often be interpreted in different ways by different experts.
- The "evidence-based policy" model implies that policy should be decided solely by evidence. In practice, evidence is only one of a number of factors – including ethical and economic considerations and public acceptability – which help to shape policy decisions. Some practitioners have suggested that "evidence-informed policy" is a more appropriate term to reflect the relationship between evidence and policy.⁶
- Overplaying the role of evidence in the policy process can put pressure on policy makers to find evidence to justify every decision, even where a decision may have been taken for valid political reasons. The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee identified a need for greater openness about the different factors behind policy decisions and any gaps in the evidence base.

Evidence from the Social Sciences

While discussions of "evidence-based policy" have tended to concentrate on evidence from the natural sciences, there has been increasing recognition that evidence from the social sciences also has a role to play. However, some studies suggest that not all government departments make full use of social science research.

For example, a 2007 study by the Defra Scientific Advisory Council found that the potential of social science to inform policy was not well understood within Defra, and that social research evidence was not always valued as highly as evidence from the natural sciences.⁷ A 2008 report by the British Academy concluded that there was scope to strengthen its use in policy-making.⁸

Evidence from the Humanities

The British Academy report also expressed concern that evidence from research in humanities disciplines, including history, is under-utilised in public policy making. Many policy-makers appear to have a limited appreciation of what the humanities have to offer, and available data point to limited government expenditure on humanities research. For example, the Department for International Development (DfID) currently spends a greater proportion of its total expenditure on research than any other department, and has pledged to increase research funding to £220 million by 2010/11. However, it commissions no humanities research. The Chief Scientific Adviser of DfID told the British Academy that "there is a lack of investment in humanities research, particularly in relation to cultural sensitivity in developing programmes and institutions in developing countries."⁹

History in Policy: Current Policy Uses

Historical Research

Where historical evidence does inform the policy process, it tends to be via informal routes rather than the more structured mechanisms which exist for scientific advice. Box 4 explains some of the current obstacles to better engagement between historians and policy-makers.

Box 4. Links Between Policy-Makers and Historians

Policy-makers are sometimes unaware of the possible benefits of using historical evidence, and have few ways of finding out about potentially relevant research. Similarly, historians who feel their research may have something to offer have limited avenues open to them to make contact with policy makers. A 2008 report by the Council for Science and Technology (CST) found that "engagement between academics and policy-makers in the UK is not as strong as it might be". It recommended building up both formal and informal networks between government and academia.¹⁰

More use could be made of learned societies and academies to help to bridge the gap between historical research and policy. An organisation such as the British Academy, for example, is well-placed to link humanities and social science researchers with policy makers, while those such as the Royal Society and the Academy of Medical Sciences have good policy links in the natural and medical sciences. Such organisations could play a role similar to that of government scientific advisers in drawing together evidence from historical research and explaining it in a clear and concise way to policy-makers.

Below are some examples – aside from informal networks – of the current uses of historical evidence in policy.

- Seminars have been a useful way for policy-makers to discuss key issues with historians. One successful example is a series of historical seminars on chemical and biological weapons, co-organised by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Sussex and Harvard universities. The invitation-only meetings are held off the record and aim to promote open discussion between government officials and academics.
- Contributions from historians have sometimes been sought alongside scientific evidence to produce policy advice. For example, the government's Foresight Programme uses an evidence-based approach to help to identify long-term policy priorities. It used evidence from historians in two recent projects: one on the future of psychoactive substances and one on the future of infectious diseases.
- *History and Policy* is an organisation which works to improve contacts between historians and policymakers.¹¹ It maintains a database of historians willing to engage with policy-makers or the media, publishes short papers written by historians on current policy issues, and organises events and seminars. The group has also worked with historians to submit evidence to parliamentary committee inquiries. For example, in 2007 historian Dr. Mark Roodhouse submitted evidence to the Commons Environmental Audit Select Committee, drawing on the wartime experience of rationing to give a historical perspective

on personal carbon trading.

- The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (RELU), funded by several research councils with contributions from Defra, uses evidence from various disciplines including history to investigate the policy challenges faced by rural areas. An ongoing RELU project, being led by Dr Clive Potter at Imperial College, London, is examining the 1970s Dutch Elm Disease epidemic to see whether lessons can be learned for the handling of a current tree disease, Sudden Oak Death.

While the use of historical research in policy-making remains limited, the government sometimes uses history in other ways. Box 5 gives some examples of these uses.

Box 5. Non-Policy Uses of History in Government Official Histories and Departmental Historians

The Cabinet Office official history programme commissions eminent historians to write accounts of important aspects of Britain's past. The programme was originally set up in 1908 to learn lessons from the Boer War, and aims to provide an authoritative record of events, as well as useful information for policy-makers. Recent topics include histories of privatisation, the civil service and the Falklands campaign.

Some departments also have in-house historians. For example, the FCO employs four professional historians whose main task is to publish the official record of British foreign policy. They also provide briefings and historical background on current policy issues, contribute to speech writing and organise occasional lectures and seminars. In practice, they mainly explain and support rather than shape policy.

Institutional Memory

It is difficult to generalise about the practices of different government departments in drawing on institutional memory. However, a recent study of the use of history in health policy-making found that it tended to be lacking and that there was little awareness of long-term political history and tactics among policy-makers, partly due to civil servants switching posts rapidly.¹² In contrast, the Arms Control and Disarmament Research Unit (ACDRU) at the FCO employs two experts to deliver a form of institutional memory. They use a combination of personal experience and official archives to provide the historical background to important negotiations and to explain the reasons for past decisions. Other research analysts offer comparable support for the FCO's geographic and functional departments.

Other Uses of History

Politicians sometimes refer to history to justify or explain policy decisions rather than to inform policy-making. For example, speeches about the future of the NHS have often used history to make links with the values of its founder, Nye Bevan, and to provide a sense of continuity with the past.

History and the Policy Process

Lack of awareness about historical research among policy-makers may be a barrier to its effective use in policy-making. Often history is viewed as "common sense" or as a collection of facts, and the role of analysis is not understood. A better understanding of the nature of historical research could help policy-makers to identify where history might be useful and to ensure that it is being used effectively.

However, policy-makers are unlikely to have time to devote to reading long and complicated histories. Historians who wish to engage with policy need to learn to present their work in a concise and policy relevant form. More use could be made of existing resources such as the *History and Policy* network, mentioned previously, which produces short papers providing historical perspectives on current issues.

While many historians are keen to engage with policy, the current Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), used to assess research in university departments, is based mainly on journal publications. Critics have argued that this encourages academics to focus on the short-term goal of publishing papers, rather than on policy engagement. It also deters academics from undertaking policy-focussed research, which tends not to be published in prestigious journals. The new Research Excellence Framework (REF) currently being developed by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) to replace the RAE, could provide an opportunity to address this.

Overview

- History can provide new perspectives on current problems and help policy-makers to learn from past successes and failures.
- While there are some exceptions, historical research is in general not widely used by policy-makers.
- Historians are often keen to engage with policy, but currently have few options or incentives for doing so.
- Improved links between policy-makers and historians could be beneficial for both parties.

Endnotes

- ¹ The "Northumberland" report on Foot and Mouth Disease, 1969.
- ² Abigail Woods, *A Manufactured Plague: the History of Foot and Mouth Disease in Britain* (London, 2004).
- ³ Nadja Durbach, *Bodily Matters: the Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853-1907* (London, 2005).
- ⁴ House of Commons Transport Committee, *Integrated Transport: the Future of Light Rail and Modern Trams in the United Kingdom*, 2005.
- ⁵ David Edgerton, *Science, Technology and the British Industrial 'Decline', 1870-1970* (Cambridge, 1996).
- ⁶ House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Scientific Advice, Risk and Evidence-Based Policymaking*, 2006.
- ⁷ *Social Research in Defra*, Defra Scientific Advisory Council Social Science Sub-Group, November 2007.
- ⁸ *Punching Our Weight: the Humanities and Social Sciences in Public Policy Making*, British Academy report, September 2008.
- ⁹ *Punching our weight* p. 29.
- ¹⁰ *How Academia and Government Can Work Together*, Council for Science and Technology report, October 2008.
- ¹¹ www.historyandpolicy.org
- ¹² Virginia Berridge, "History Matters? History's Role in Health Policy Making", *Medical History* vol. 52 (2008) pp 311-326.

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POST is grateful to Melissa Smith for researching this briefing, to the ESRC for funding his parliamentary fellowship, and to all contributors and reviewers. For further information on this subject, please contact Prof David Cope, at POST.