

Making impact with history: how policy makers have much to learn from historians and social scientists and why academic writing must strive for clarity

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Dan Jackson argues that policy makers must take a look at history books before consulting policy briefings, and discusses what academics can learn from online organisations that connect policy makers with historians.



A background in history is almost the perfect grounding for a career in the public services. I would say this of course, but in my experience history graduates tend to be some of the most inquisitive and best informed out there. Their understanding of the broad contours of political history means that they instinctively ‘get’ policy debates, and can quickly apprehend where parties and politicians are coming from – a far from universal skill, even in the public sector.

What is more, all those years in the library, or the archive, or on their feet in the lecture hall, means that the best historians tend to be comfortable handling stacks of information, making a case and then presenting it convincingly. As Martin Reeves, the Chief

Executive of Coventry City Council, recently pointed out “research should be at the beating heart of local government”, and I firmly believe that analytical skills picked up in a History Department are eminently transferrable to most parts of the public sector.

I am a former doctoral student, who joined local government via the excellent [National Graduate Development Programme](#). This had a significant academic element at [Warwick Business School](#), but it was the practical experience of working at both strategic and operational levels early on in my career that was most useful to me. What I found most surprising, though, was not only the considerable latitude councils had to innovate (even under the Audit Commission regime), but also how unsystematic such policy development could be. Google was invariably the first port of call, possibly followed by the [IDeA](#) site “to see what other people are doing”, but there was certainly no ongoing dialogue with the university sector, or even thinktanks, on what works.

Professor Judy Sebba has already pinpointed all that needs to be said about the [limited influence UK universities currently have in policy development](#). In my experience, academic writing is often more about demonstrating cleverness, rather than clarity, and research still tends towards process, rather than outcome. This needs to change. Localism and the general power of competence, means even more freedom to innovate, and this presents a fantastic opportunity for universities to raise their game and get involved.

I have been encouraged by developments like the social innovation marketplace website [Simpl](#), the IDeA’s own [communities of practice](#) site, and even the excellent [History and Policy](#) which have shown how social media and the web can connect policy makers with the solutions they crave. Universities have much to learn from these approaches.

And yet ... having a grounding in history not only provides you with a useful reference bank to compare current challenges to (although my frequent practice of comparing any knotty problem to the famous ‘[Schleswig Holstein question](#)’ is probably wearing a bit thin) it can also give you a healthy scepticism about ‘the next big thing’. For example, the government’s laudable Child Poverty agenda is welcome, but I have been struck that many in this field seem to think we are the first

generation to think about 'poverty' and that it is easily solvable with just a few more children's centres (have they never heard of the [Poor Law](#)? Marx? Beveridge?).

This was brought firmly home to me at the recent centenary celebrations of South Shields Town Hall. As part of these events, we arranged for the distinguished historian (and Shields native) [Professor Robert Colls](#) to give a talk on what the town was like in 1910. Brimming with illuminating insights, he talked of the civic pride that had inspired the Town Hall's construction, and the industrial innovation that created the town's wealth. Without a whiff of nostalgia, he also explored what he called the 'committees of public safety' the informal but effective networks of women who basically ran a town where most of the men were either underground, in the pub, or away at sea. It only occurred to me afterwards that our award winning [Tyne Gateway project](#) is trying to recapture those networks and that sense of empowerment, by recruiting parents in poverty to help their own neighbours. Perhaps we should have started with the history books, instead of the policy briefings.

Dr Dan Jackson is Strategic Commissioning Lead for Children and Families at South Tyneside Council, a visiting fellow of Northumbria University, and a director of the Linskill and North Tyneside Community Development Trust. His book *Popular Opposition to Irish Home in Edwardian Britain* was published by Liverpool University Press in 2009. He tweets as [@delaval_astley](#)