

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

M. Mandl

Why politicians need historians

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/oct/07/why-politicians-need-historians>

10/11/2014

For much of the last 40 years, historians on both sides of the Atlantic have been trained to detach themselves from the supposedly distorting imperatives of “relevance”. They have addressed their work to other historians more than to the wider public. When they have reached out, it has rarely been to shape public policy. It is time to overcome that fastidiousness.

History has played little role in policy-making for at least a generation. It made news when in 2012 the then foreign secretary, William Hague, raised the profile of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s in-house historians by moving them into the FCO’s main building on Whitehall. “They were languishing in a basement,” Hague said, “and now the light is shining on their books.”

The FCO’s in-house staff of full-time historians proudly declare on their website that they “provide a long-term, policy-relevant perspective on international issues, and contribute to the collective knowledge and understanding of the FCO and British foreign policy”. Hague, no mean historian himself – the author of well-received biographies of Pitt the Younger and William Wilberforce – recognised their usefulness. “People enjoy history. They see the relevance of it. It informs our policies.” No other government department makes such

systematic use of historians to form policy. And few professional historians seem to want to be enlisted into the policy process.

More “evidence-based policymaking” has been a battle cry since the 1980s. Yet as the sociologist Pamela Cox argues, what counts as evidence has been quite narrowly defined: either “what works”, derived from the model of clinical trials of drugs, or “what is most cost-effective”, inspired by the audit culture of public services. There is little sense that the kinds of evidence used by historians can be a basis for policy: documentary records, archives or serial data, for instance. They might reveal what “worked” but not what is most cost-effective. When it comes to forming political or administrative decisions, the future still gets much more attention than the past.

One benefit of historical perspective is learning that it wasn’t always that way. For centuries, even millennia, historians advised rulers, enlightened citizens and shaped policy. The really long view would go all the way back to Thucydides, drawing timeless lessons about human nature from the conflicts among fellow Greeks, or even as far as Cicero, for whom history was the “guide to life”.

A medium-term view would light on the Regius Professorships of History in Cambridge and Oxford, founded in 1724 by George I to equip young gentlemen with the knowledge of “Modern History and ... Modern Languages” they might need as diplomats, or on the late-Victorian holder of the Cambridge Regius chair, JR Seeley, who thought history was nothing less than a “school of statesmanship”.

In the 20th century, historians shaped local government, steered the course of empires and advised presidents. The Fabian historians Beatrice and Sidney Webb spearheaded the London Programme, a plan for London’s future housing, transport and water needs, using expertise they gained co-authoring a multi-volume history of English government since the middle ages. Sidney Webb also served as secretary of state for the colonies and as secretary of state for the dominions in Ramsay Macdonald’s second Labour government.

The mid-1960s were the high-water mark for historians in public policy. In the US, Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr became the court historian of John F Kennedy’s Camelot as a presidential adviser, and the radical historian of American foreign relations William Appleman Williams turned down the chance to steer Latin American policy for the Kennedy administration. (At least he was asked.) The last historian seconded to the White House was Eric F Goldman, a professor of American history from Princeton, who was a special adviser to Lyndon Johnson in 1963-66. In 1965, a historical section was added to Britain’s Treasury but its operations were wound up in 1976, “after its early advocates moved on and the relevance of its work to the ‘man at the desk’ became subject to concerted challenge”, as the historian of public policy Alix Green has observed.

The near-universal retreat of historians from the formation of high-level policy is both a product and a cause of the endemic short-termism of our times. When the FCO historians describe their work as both “long-term” and “policy-relevant”, they state something of an oxymoron for policymakers. To be “policy-relevant” is almost by definition to focus on the

short-term, as quarterly reporting, brief electoral cycles and planning horizons of at most five years determine almost all aspects of public life.

Short-termism is an increasingly inadequate way to face up to contemporary national and global challenges. The hot new term for these problems is “megatrends”. Mathew Burrows, a former analyst for the US National Intelligence Council (holder of a PhD in history), has diagnosed various “megatrends that will undo the world” in his recent book, *The Future, Declassified*. These include struggles over natural resources, the ballooning global middle class, exploding healthcare costs for ageing populations and mounting threats to privacy and data protection.

The Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations – an international panel of experts – identified a similar range of megatrends for coming decades in its 2013 report, *Now for the Long Term*. Their motto might be the line they quote from former French premier, Pierre Mendès France: *gouverner, c’est prévoir*: to govern is to foresee. Better advice would be Winston Churchill’s: “The longer you can look back, the further you can look forward.”

Historians, taking a term from the great French practitioner of their craft Fernand Braudel, would call this the *longue durée*. The long view allows us to ask about the rise of long-term complexes over many decades, centuries or millennia and to distinguish what is temporary or contingent from what is enduring and cumulative among our current global discontents. It can also reveal alternative strategies from past societies. This can liberate us from the assumption that history can be reduced to path-dependency, as some economists might argue.

The future need not run in the ruts of the past. It is possible to jump the tracks and take a new direction. Only by delving deep into the past can we hope to project ourselves imaginatively any meaningful distance into the future.

A recent example of how taking the long view can transform public debate is Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Piketty has shown that standard analyses of the relationship between booming capitalism and declining inequality rested on short-run data collected in the historically anomalous decades after the second world war. His analysis of more than 200 years of data on western incomes reveals instead that inequality within societies is more likely to grow than contract and that it has been accelerating since the 1970s. This finding has profound implications for tax policy, social welfare and social cohesion more generally. But the pattern only emerged when the long-run trumped the short-term. Not for nothing has Piketty called his book “as much a work of history as of economics”.

Debates on climate change also reflect the advantages and the limitations of historical perspective. On the one hand, Barack Obama’s former undersecretary for science in the US energy department, Steven Koonin, has recently argued for humility about future policy because we lack long-run data about the role of the oceans in climate change: “Precise, comprehensive observations of the oceans are available only for the past few decades.” On the other, historical economist Anil Markandya has shown that environmental regulation in

19th-century Britain did not have “any serious impact on GDP per capita”, overturning the orthodoxy that there is a necessary trade-off between growth and environmental protection. Meanwhile, French historians Sabine Barles and Gilles Billen have examined Paris’s “nitrogen footprint” to show how urban managers there invented sustainable practices for recycling waste in large cities: these are precedents relevant to practice and policy today.

Historical thinking – and not just by those who call themselves historians – can and should inform practice and policy today. The Cambridge-based History & Policy network has been notably successful at creating dialogue between historians and civil servants and at getting its evidence-based position papers on topics such as pension reform, women’s participation in politics and the governance of Northern Ireland into public discussion. Elsewhere, units staffed by trained historians investigate and adjudicate land claims by First Nations people in Canada and by Maoris in New Zealand, leading to radical revisions of the social contract in both countries. And in the recent debates on Scottish independence, the views of historians on the past and the prospects of the union carried unusual weight even if, as Scotland’s leading historian Sir Tom Devine quipped, “the future is not my period”.

History should not be just affirmation, like Michael Gove’s myth of a single “national past”. Nor should it be entertainment: merely something “people enjoy”. It is a critical science for questioning short-term views, complicating simple stories about causes and consequences, and discovering roads not taken. History can upset the established consensus, expand narrow horizons and, in Simon Schama’s words, “keep the powerful awake at night”. In that mission lies the public future of the past.