

Introduction

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This book is intended to provide a companion text to *Policy Making in Britain: An Introduction* (Dorey, 2005), which examines the key characteristics of policy making in Britain, and discusses the roles played by the main policy actors in the British policy process. Although plenty of examples and empirical evidence were provided to illustrate and clarify key points and concepts, it was readily acknowledged that students of British public policy would benefit enormously from a separate text which examined distinct areas of public policy much more specifically and systematically.

This text therefore provides a series of ‘case studies’ of particular policy areas in Britain, from 1945 to the present day. The policies were selected both for their intrinsic importance, and because they clearly illustrated or exemplified key aspects – either conceptual or empirical (or both) – of policy making and the policy process in Britain, along with the factors which contribute to policy continuity and policy change. Having determined the key policies to be covered, a leading, internationally-renowned, academic expert in each policy, was invited to write the relevant chapter, in which they were asked to identify the main actors, concepts, influences, issues, objectives, paradigms and overall developments in their particular area of policy. The contributors, we are delighted to note, have admirably fulfilled this remit, and we are therefore extremely grateful to them. In so doing, they have provided a collection of essays which should be essential reading for students of British public policy.

In Chapter 1, Wyn Grant analyses the key features of agricultural policy in Britain since 1945, drawing particular attention to the ‘productionist’ policy paradigm which prevailed until the 1990s, whereafter various crises, scientific evidence, environmental considerations and increasing consumer concern about food safety combined to call into question the impact and efficacy of intensive farming methods and widespread use of agri-chemicals. Grant shows how these developments also served to destabilize the agricultural policy community, which not only obliged the National Farmers’ Union to accept the involvement of other groups and interests in agricultural policy making, but culminated in the abolition of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and its replacement by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Chapter 2 sees Colin Thain surveying the main developments in British economic policy since the Second World War. Not only is economic policy a crucially important topic in its own right, it also impacts upon all of the other policies examined in this book. Thain illustrates how, from the mid-1940s until about 1973, successive governments adhered to Keynesianism, whereby policy makers used a judicious blend of monetary and fiscal tools to maintain (or boost) demand, in order to maintain full employment, and prevent an economic

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slump. Such governmental regulation of the economy, coupled with the explicit bipartisan commitment to full employment, was in stark contrast to the economic orthodoxy of the pre-war era, characterized by the 'Great Depression' and mass unemployment of the 1930s. During the 1960s, growing concern about low rates of economic growth and relative economic decline led policy makers to supplement Keynesianism with experiments in indicative planning, and a shift towards 'voluntaristic corporatism', entailing the incorporation of trade union leaders and employers into economic policy making. Ministers were particularly concerned to craft policies which improved rates of economic growth and industrial productivity, and maintained full employment, yet which did not fuel inflation.

By the 1970s, though, the 'Keynesian consensus' was crumbling, and the 1980s and 1990s therefore heralded new approaches to economic management, initially in the form of monetarism, and then, when this proved too problematic, the adoption of what Thain terms 'monetary-constrained Keynesianism'. Certainly, during the first half of the 1980s, the Conservative Governments led by Margaret Thatcher were ideologically committed to monetarism, and thus constituted a decisive break with the macroeconomic policies which had prevailed during the 1950s and 1960s. Rather than seeking to reverse economic decline and recession through an expansion of government intervention in the economy and increased public expenditure, the early 1980s witnessed the Thatcher Governments explicitly committing themselves to cutting public expenditure and borrowing (albeit with limited success), curbing the money supply (often via raising interest rates deliberately to make borrowing more expensive, and thus less financially attractive), reducing the economic and industrial role of the state, promoting liberalization and enterprise, and focusing supply-side reforms (rather than directly seeking to boost demand through reflation). Although the Thatcher Governments' early monetarist experiment itself encountered various problems, and proved difficult to sustain in the long term, it did have profound implications for virtually all other policy areas in Britain.

Education policy is the subject of Chapter 3, in which Clyde Chitty notes the extent to which education provision from the mid-1940s to the late 1980s was shaped by the principles and provisions of the 1944 Education Act. This Act – itself the product of the Wartime Coalition Government – effectively laid the basis for a national education system in England and Wales, free at the point of access, but which was administered through local education authorities (LEAs). Furthermore, although not stipulated or recommended in the Act (which was actually rather ambiguous on issues such as the structure of secondary education and schools) there was an increasing trend towards comprehensive schooling, a trend which was given a considerable and conscious boost by the 1964–70 Labour Governments. Meanwhile, an education policy community was clearly discernible, with the Ministry/Department of Education, the Association of Education Committees, LEAs, and the National Union of Teachers working very closely together with regard to education policy.

By the 1970s, however, there was growing disquiet in a number of quarters about the structure and provision of education in England and Wales, to the extent that in October 1976, the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, publicly called for a 'Great Debate' about education. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s, though, that this growing disquiet was translated into a series of reforms of secondary education on England and Wales, whereupon the former emphasis on partnership between central government, LEAs and the

educational profession was supplanted by a demand for greater accountability by schools and teachers, and a new emphasis on parental choice. With schools also being encouraged to opt-out of LEA control – and parents granted ballots to express their support for such a move – and central government imposing a controversial National Curriculum (and other related reforms) which was widely denounced by many teaching unions, the 1980s and 1990s heralded a destabilizing of the education policy community. Ministers aligned themselves with parents against the ‘education establishment’, which was deemed to be characterized by ‘trendy Left-wing’ ideas and teaching methods – allegedly a product of 1960s liberalism – which placed too much emphasis on ‘child-centred learning’, at the expense of the ‘three Rs’ (reading, writing and arithmetic), standards and discipline in schools.

In Chapter 4, Steve Marsh examines British foreign policy since 1945, placing particular emphasis on how policy makers have sought to square the three circles (as Winston Churchill originally characterized them) of post-war British foreign policy, namely empire and Commonwealth, the ‘special relationship’ with the United States, and Europe. Marsh begins by outlining the context in which post-war British foreign policy has been developed, highlighting such variables as Britain’s relative decline, international systemic change, technological developments and globalization. He then analyses Britain’s relationships with the Commonwealth, the United States and Europe during the Cold War era (1945–90), before delineating the main features of British foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, to the present day. In spite of the various changes which have occurred since 1945, both in terms of Britain’s own relative decline, and in international relations generally, Marsh suggests that perhaps the most notable feature of post-war British foreign policy has actually been its consistency, particularly in terms of Britain’s determination to remain a global power, and exercise a significant influence – in partnership with the United States – in international relations.

Health policy is the subject of Chapter 5, in which Helen Jones notes that, until the 1980s, the dominant policy paradigm was that of curative medicine provided by NHS hospitals and general practitioners (GPs), rather than forms of preventative medicine. In other words, health care was generally equated with medical treatment. Moreover, the NHS was funded almost overwhelmingly from general taxation and National Insurance contributions, thereby ensuring that medical treatment was free at the point of access or need. Health policy also provided another good example of a policy community, with the medical profession, most notably through the British Medical Association (BMA) and the Department of Health, usually working very closely together to determine the nation’s health needs, and the way that these should be provided for. Furthermore, proposals to expand or improve health care in Britain usually focused on the need to build new hospitals or modernize existing ones.

Since the 1980s, though, the altered politico-ideological climate, coupled with growing concern about the inexorably rising costs of the NHS (an issue lent added resonance by both governmental concern to curb public expenditure generally, and an ageing population), has yielded a number of changes in British health policy. Most notable of these, Jones explains, have been the 1980s’ promotion of private health care and medical insurance, with Conservative Ministers encouraging (what economists call) ‘exit’ from the NHS, a major concern with such criteria as cost-effectiveness, efficiency and value-for-money in

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the delivery of health care, and a greater emphasis on public and preventative health care, with individuals exhorted to take much greater responsibility for their personal health, and the impact of their life-styles on their physical well-being. The NHS itself has also been subject to internal restructuring and reorganization, with managers ascribed a much greater role. This has reduced the former role and autonomy of doctors and consultants somewhat, and thus weakened the health policy community to some degree, particularly as successive governments have also insisted that patients be granted more rights and choice as ‘consumers’.

With regard to housing policy, Chapter 6 provides an account by Peter Malpass which notes how the post-war era has witnessed an inexorable rise in homeownership, a corresponding decline in the private rented sector, and a major shift in the provision of public or social housing by local authorities. Until the 1970s, there was a mixed economy of housing, whereby those who could afford to so tended to buy their own homes, whilst those on low(er) incomes predominantly rented a house from their local authority. To many observers, this distinction between homeowners and council tenants seemed to symbolise class inequalities and life-styles in Britain.

During the 1980s, however, homeownership was given a significant boost by virtue of the Conservative Governments’ policy of selling council houses. With local authorities prohibited from using the revenues to build new council houses to replace those they had sold, the stock of local authority housing diminished considerably. To reduce the role of local authorities further, the Thatcher–Major Governments actively encouraged housing associations and other not-for-profit bodies to take over the management and provision of what became increasingly referred to as ‘social housing’.

One other significant change since the 1980s, which Malpass identifies, concerns the various forms of financial support and subsidies previously available to homeowners and tenants, but which have been reduced or removed altogether. Deregulation of the private rental sector has effectively ended rent controls (so that rent controls have been replaced by ‘the market’ as the primary determinant of levels of rent charged by landlords). At the same time, rent rebates and levels of housing benefit for low-income tenants – private or local authority – have been reduced. Meanwhile, in spite of the active promotion of homeownership, successive governments since the 1980s have reduced mortgage tax relief, to the point where it was abolished completely in April 2000.

Industrial relations provides the subject matter of Chapter 7, which identifies the various strategies adopted by policy makers to deal with the trade unions since 1945. During the post-war period in Britain, the trade unions’ status changed from that of putative partners (with policy makers) to political pariahs, and so during this period of transformation the issue of industrial relations moved steadily up the policy agenda. During the 1960s and 1970s, governmental concern over trade union behaviour and power led to oscillation between two industrial relations policies, namely neo-corporatism, whereby the unions would be treated as partners in economic and industrial policy making (in the hope that this would yield greater responsibility and ‘maturity’), and legalism, whereby statutory curbs would be placed on the unions to compel them to behave more responsibly. This latter policy replaced neo-corporatism entirely during the 1980s and 1990s, during which time industrial relations was also transformed by various other policies and wider structural changes.

In Chapter 8, Stephen Thornton examines the evolution of British pensions policy since 1945, during which time, he explains, policy makers have repeatedly sought to address certain deficiencies arising from the basic, flat-rate, old-age pension introduced in 1946. In particular, cognizant of the subsistence level at which the state pension has invariably been set (with many pensioners living in poverty), whilst recognizing the funding problems which would accrue from significantly increasing it (such as having to increase NI contributions or/and tax rates for those in work), policy makers have devised various 'top-up' schemes to supplement the state pension. These have often revolved around occupational or private pensions, but as Thornton explains, none has so far provided a lasting or workable solution. For example, pension schemes which are occupational or 'earnings-related' have generally been of little use to low-paid workers who are at most risk of enduring poverty in their old age: such schemes are likely to replicate socio-economic inequalities into retirement. Furthermore, low-paid workers – even assuming they could somehow afford to contribute to a pension scheme – have often been of little commercial interest to private pension companies. On the other hand, various scandals, controversies and shortfalls in the value of 'payouts' since the 1980s, have made some people wary of private pension schemes. In the context of Britain's ageing population, the need for an attractive and affordable pensions policy is more urgent than ever, but the Blair Government appears to be struggling as much as previous administrations in attempting to formulate such a policy.

Transport policy is the subject of Chapter 9, in which Nick Robinson delineates the three general options available to policy makers since 1945. He explains how one of these options, namely 'predict-and-provide', constituted the dominant transport policy paradigm until the 1970s. This particular policy option reflected the premise that increasing car ownership and ensuing traffic congestion should be addressed through the construction of more roads and motorways. This approach was supported by a corresponding transport policy community comprising the Department of Transport and key organized interests representing road transport users. Wider concerns, such as those pertaining to the environmental and public health impact of increased traffic and road-building, and other interests, such as those of public transport users, were largely excluded. Since the 1970s, however, such concerns and interests have been taken more seriously, thereby yielding challenges to the 'predict-and-provide' policy paradigm, and enabling alternative transport policies to be promoted, with the growing use of congestion charging providing a good example. Meanwhile, the transport policy community – rather like its agricultural counterpart – has been somewhat destabilized by the incorporation of various environmental groups into transport policy making, coupled with public concern over the health problems (particularly respiratory diseases arising from inhalation of exhaust fumes) posed by heavy volumes of traffic in Britain's towns and cities.

Chapter 10 is the concluding chapter, and seeks to extrapolate the main findings of the chapters in this book, so that the main sources of both continuity and change in British public policy can be summarized. The chapter notes that prior to the 1980s, considerable continuity was facilitated, not only by the general political context (entailing a broad consensus between the Labour and Conservative Parties on many key policy issues and objectives, which often led to successive governments pursuing similar policies, or building

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upon those of their predecessors), but by various conceptual and empirical features, such as the prevalence of policy communities in a number of policy areas, along with dominant policy paradigms which shaped and sustained institutional agendas. Many senior Ministers during this period also adopted a predominantly managerial style of political leadership *vis-à-vis* their Departments, which ensured that attempts at imposing significant policy change tended to the exception rather than the rule. The cumulative and combined impact of these features was the existence of what Jordan and Richardson (1982) identified as a distinct 'British policy style'.

However, from the 1980s onwards, many of these spheres of public policy experienced considerable change. Many such changes derived from the significantly different ideological and political framework which became established in the 1980s, and which itself both reflected and reinforced trends and transformation in the British economy. Yet changes in public policy from the 1980s onwards are also attributable to the destabilization of a number of formerly closed and highly-conservative policy communities, which were either challenged by new medical knowledge or scientific evidence (which served to challenge or discredit some of their normative principles and policy goals) or confronted by senior Ministers who increasingly adopted an activist or agenda-setting role, and were sometimes willing to invoke 'despotic power' in order to resistance to change by Departments and/or organized interests. This new role adopted by at least some Cabinet Ministers was itself partly attributable to reforms of the civil service (which sought to downgrade the policy advice role of civil servants, and, instead, placed much greater emphasis on 'policy delivery'), and the increasing use of Special Advisers to generate new ideas and innovative policy proposals. Arguably, think-tanks also became a more important source of policy advice for some Ministers. These developments, in turn, served to undermine various policy paradigms – which had previously sustained discernible institutional agendas – so that from the 1980s onwards a number of 'paradigm shifts' occurred in British public policy; the causes and consequences of these developments in British public policy will become evident in the chapters that follow.