Dear Prime Minister...

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Welcome to the Summer 2010 issue of Policy World. Inside we cover social policy in Australia and continue coverage of developments with regard to the Research Excellence Framework and research ethics, whilst Nicola Yeates considers the implications of cuts for HE. Our main feature, however, sees voices from SPA make powerful cases to the new government on a range of social policy issues. As well as being sent to SPA members, this issue of Policy World will go to the Prime Minister, and to ministers and the most senior officials in the relevant government departments.

The next issue – due in the Autumn - will carry full coverage of the 2010 conference, so do look out if you weren’t able to take part this time.

Best wishes

Chris Blunkell, Editor
CAROLINE GLENDINNING

CHAIR’S INTRODUCTION

Although the January SPA Executive meeting was cancelled because of bad weather, activities have continued apace. The new SPA website is now live (www.social-policy.org.uk), and our thanks go to Steve McKay for maintaining the old website over the past few years, and to Adam Whitworth for developing the new one.

The forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) has been occupying increasing amounts of the Executive’s time – not least a seminar to discuss the experiences of the research impact pilots and discussions about the configuration of panels (see the report on p8). Another issue which is likely to dominate the SPA’s agenda over the coming year is the impact of funding cuts in teaching and research in social policy. Here, Nicola Yeates outlines early developments in collaboration with other learned societies, and we welcome information and suggestions for SPA activities in this area.

The SPA used to maintain a database of members’ research interests, which members were invited to log when they joined or renewed membership, although our current membership arrangements have made it impossible to maintain the database in its original form. However, we are considering relaunching it – not least because of the potential for use as a resource by journalists and commentators seeking expert opinion and comment. We would welcome members’ views on the usefulness of this proposal.

In addition to the well-established Small Grants scheme, we would welcome proposals and bids from members for conferences, seminars and other activities of benefit to SPA members that the SPA could co-sponsor and co-fund. Please forward any bids to me at cg20@york.ac.uk, for consideration by the Executive Committee.

Finally, I look forward to seeing you at the annual conference at the University of Lincoln, 5th – 7th July. This looks like being a bumper event, with a fine selection of plenary speakers; extra streams to accommodate the papers submitted for presentation; and additional sessions on research funding, the REF and Special Interest Groups. Registration is going well, with increased interest from social policy academics from overseas. For the first time, postgraduate activities will be ‘mainstreamed’ into the main conference programme. We hope that you will welcome both overseas visitors and postgraduate conference delegates. My thanks – the first of many – to Hugh Bochel and his conference planning team, particularly for their good humour in responding to the many last minute requests for additions and alterations to the conference programme.

Caroline Glendinning
Chair SPA

SMALL GRANTS SCHEMES

The SPA invites applications for its Standard and Postgraduate Small Grants schemes, designed to help fund seminars and workshops dealing with research and/or learning & teaching in a way that is of benefit to the social policy community and SPA members. The focus should be on activities that will benefit a group or network rather than individuals.

During 2010, applications for awards to support events with an international focus and/or to facilitate attendance from overseas are particularly encouraged.

Funds will be made available in two rounds of applications over the year. Round one runs from 1st January to 30th June and round two from 1st July to 31st December. Applications are welcomed at any point within each award period, and funds are allocated on a first-come first-served basis.

Each award offers a maximum of £500.

Full terms and conditions, as well as information on how to apply, are available on the SPA website. Alternatively, contact SPA Small Grants Officer Majalla Kilkey.

PUBLIC EXPENDITURE CUTS TO HIGHER EDUCATION:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE?

One of the pressing issues faced by academic social policy, like other social science disciplines, is the cuts to public expenditure in higher education (HE). In December 2009 future cuts to the science and educational research budgets of £600 million were announced by Peter Mandelson. These cuts need to be seen in the context of HEFCE’s budget and in addition to previous restructuring of the government’s lifelong learning policy which has disproportionately adversely impacted upon universities with a high proportion of part-time studies.

The impacts of these cuts are already being seen in the sector, ranging from the withdrawal of courses, to the closure of departments, to recruitment freezes, to voluntary and forced redundancies. As these cuts work their way through the system, there will be major losses. From a learned society perspective, losses can be expected from the contraction of employment in the sector and as a result of squeezes in research and scholarship budgets.

At its April meeting the Learned Societies’ CEO/Chief Officers’ Group of the Academy of Social Sciences convened a special discussion on how public expenditure cuts are likely to affect the social sciences. The concern is that, in the context of special treatment in budgetary allocations for science, technology, engineering and maths (the so-called STEM subjects), the burden of the cuts will be borne by social sciences with long-lasting and damaging effects through capacity stripping. From an SPA perspective, we need to be pro-active in ensuring the burden of cuts does not further disproportionately fall on social policy teaching and research.
Professor Paul Wellings, speaking in his capacity as chair of the 1994 Group, emphasised the cuts were to be understood as marking a clear break in – indeed a reversal of - the pattern of increased investment in HE in recent years which has grown by about 5 per cent per annum. It is unclear what the nature and scale of future cuts will be and how these will fall on different universities and subject areas. However, universities have been rightly cautious about accepting these cuts as inevitable and have argued that there is a compelling case for investment in HE on economic grounds. Of note is that the HE sector contributes some £59 billion to the British economy, and that it is among the top ten service exporters in the UK. Here, Prof. Wellings emphasised that a key line of attack is the importance of multi- and interdisciplinary research in driving emergent areas of investment and employment whether it be in the (much vaunted) area of environmental technology or in responding to socio-demographic changes such as ageing populations and to global health threats. The danger, however, is that this becomes a version of interdisciplinarity in which social science subjects are unequal partners, and the need to (re)present social sciences as having a coherent basis in their own right was emphasised. The HE sector will need to defend itself and the social sciences in a vigorous and timely way. As the implementation of cuts works its way through, we need to watch which particular areas of activity are being supported or disinvested in - not only by the government but also by individual institutions, since the cuts are likely to be fought out at university level. Thus we can expect the cuts to play out differently across the social sciences and between institutions, with further differences between the nations of the UK.

Interestingly for anyone who has been following the controversial proposal to measure research impact in the REF, Prof. Wellings emphasised the need to put together a robust and coherent statement of how research links into the policy chain as part of the proactive defence of the social sciences. Thus two agendas appear to merge.

The SPA Executive will discuss the cuts at our meeting in September, and consider possible responses.

Nicola Yeates
Vice-Chair, SPA

YOUTH POLICY & YOUTH POLITICS
IN THE UK AND FRANCE TODAY
PARIS, 16-17 SEPTEMBER 2010

A two-day international conference – to be held in Paris and supported by a small grant from the SPA – offers researchers and others working with young people the opportunity to compare and contrast the situations in France and UK from diverse perspectives.

‘Youth Politics & Youth Politics in the UK and France Today’ - to be held at the ESIT, Centre Universitaire Dauphine on 16-17 September 2010 - will take place within the CREW & CREC research groups of the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3. Day one will focus on ‘Young People and Politics’ and day two on ‘Youth Policy Issues.’ A total of five sessions will cover:

1) Young People as Political Actors
2) Young People, the Third Sector, Volunteering and Social Participation
3) Public Policies to Promote Youth Autonomy and Mobility
4) Youth Policy and Local Policy, and
3) Young People and Youth Justice.

SPA member Dr Sarah Pickard (who is organising the event with Dr Fabienne Portier and Dr Corrine Nativel) explained: “By seeing how things are done elsewhere and in different sectors, participants will widen their horizons and gain a better understanding of young people, youth policy and youth politics on both sides of the Channel. Ideally this will lead to proposals for better outcomes for young people in both countries.

“We hope the conference will lead to rich exchanges for researchers and actors via cross-cultural discussions and build a network of specialists in the field of youth, youth policy and youth politics.”

Papers will be given in both English and French, supported by simultaneous translation, and all documents will be published in both languages. A selection of conference papers will be published at Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle – PSN in 2011.

The conference is supported by several partners including, in Great Britain, the SPA and the Duke of Edinburgh’s International Association (The International Award for Young People).

The full bilingual programme and registration details can be found at www.univ-paris3.fr/youthconf2010. Delegates can also register by sending an email to youthconf2010@free.fr

For more information contact Dr Sarah Pickard (sarah.pickard@univ-paris3.fr).
The ‘White Spaces’ network aims to provide a unique forum to open up scholarship and practice in management, organisation, governance and policy through engagement with ideas from the field of ‘critical whiteness studies’. Critical whiteness studies turn the core logic of traditional race and ethnicity studies on its head by concerning itself with the accumulation of power in multicultural societies, rather than experiences of disadvantage. It is interested in how this accumulation of power has come to be associated with certain social, cultural and material practices valued in western liberal democracies. This diverse field has produced complex debate around white ethnicities which have been circulating for some time within cultural, postcolonial, literary and historical studies, but which have somewhat ironically remained marginal to policy studies and organisational theory. The network has developed in response to this marginalisation, focusing its work on exposing, describing and analysing the reproduction of institutional power in formal and informal organisational settings.

The conference was attended by more than 60 delegates from 11 different countries including Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, South Africa, United States and the UK. The presence of a number of academics, artists and activists from South Africa was a particularly welcome addition to the conference participation. Given the importance of South Africa in the global politics of race and racialisation the relative neglect of academic work from this context within UK-based critical whiteness studies is a significant intellectual omission that the conference was pleased to be able to challenge. As part of this effort we were also pleased to welcome Melissa Steyn from the University of Cape Town as one of our keynote speakers.

Participation was strongly interdisciplinary, from architecture, communication studies, fine arts and design, gender studies, geography, management, policy studies, sociology and included participants working in private and public sector contexts. These professionals mainly worked with diversity and equality, but some were based in mainstream public service work within the NHS and local government and charities such as One to One Children’s Fund. A further strength of the varied participation was the number of participants who had multiple roles across practitioner, academic and activist contexts.

Other conference keynotes were by Nirmal Puwar, Goldsmiths College; Vron Ware of the Open University; and Mick Rowlinson of Queen Mary University. Vic Seidler, also of Goldsmiths College, stood in at very short notice in the absence of Aida Hurtado from the University of California. Thirty nine other papers were presented under 12 conference themes. These included educating whiteness; white masculinity, power, subversion and resistance; white lives, emotions and resistances; reproducing bourgeois whiteness; civilising/violating whitenesses; white sexualities and space; benevolent whitenesses; constructing white educational authority; white embodied ideals; desiring privilege; constructing white families; and defining whiteness.

Dialogue and Debate
Because the conference aimed to facilitate ongoing collaborations amongst participants we included an open session called ‘Dialogue and Debate’ on the afternoon of the second day. The session aimed to provide space to reflect on and discuss key conference themes in more depth to consider where the sessions took participants theoretically, methodologically and substantively, and also to think about disciplinary connections and differences and build future directions for collaboration. This proved to be a particularly popular addition to the more usual academic conference proceedings for a number of reasons. Many participants reported the difficulties of speaking (or even thinking) through whiteness in their everyday institutional contexts. Including academic contexts like sociology and social policy, sessions provided important space to talk more personally about institutional and professional contexts as well as individual connections to the field of whiteness studies. They also gave important time to discussing, more frankly than in some of the paper sessions, issues related to radicalism/cooption in critical whiteness studies and the relationships, connections and disconnections between whiteness.

continued on page 23
Journals from The Policy Press

The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice (formerly Benefits)

“... an important clearing-house for the latest national and international thinking on ideas, findings and implications relating to topics that are central to social policy.” PETER SAUNDERS, UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

This journal provides a unique blend of high-quality research, policy and practice from leading authors in the field related to all aspects of poverty and social exclusion

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At the end of March the SPA, together with the Joint University Council for Social Work Education (JUC-SWEC), held a seminar for the 11 pilot SPSW departments. Seminar participants reported that their universities had played major roles in shaping their pilot submissions. However, without any guidance from HEFCE on the assessment criteria that would be used, these were subject to varying or conflicting interpretations of ‘impact’ and its positive and negative aspects – some participants reported being discouraged from submitting research that was controversial or critical of government policy. Within broad social science departments, applied research was more likely to be selected for the pilot because its impact was easier to document and verify than conceptual or theoretical research.

Other challenges were reported. These included:

- How to manage discrepancies between quality and impact (for example, research that was of high impact but less than excellent scientific quality). There was no guidance for the pilots on how the relationship between impact assessment and the ‘4 best’ publications would be treated. Pilot submissions were unable to use other parts of the REF submission to highlight the quality of the research whose impact was being assessed.
- Difficulties in submitting research conducted for business because of commercial confidentiality considerations.
- Difficulties in choosing between different-sized case studies (for example, a large research team vs. an individual researcher).
- Difficulties in establishing clear causal relationships between research and its alleged impact.
- Difficulties in corroborating evidence of impact where researchers did not currently work in the unit of assessment – tracing former colleagues was time-consuming, and could in any case conflict with the interests of their current employing university.

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Workload
Preparing overview statements and case study documentation for the pilots was reported to be very labour-intensive, especially work to contact research end-users to verify claims of impact. Workload considerations were reported to have influenced the selection of case studies, with easily-verifiable examples being preferred. There were concerns that the additional work involved in verifying impact could discourage the submission of cross-disciplinary and collaborative research. Seminar participants urged considerable caution in reporting the results of the pilots, particularly as submissions were compiled without guidance on the criteria that would be used to judge them. Participants concluded that a major priority for HEFCE was to clarify the relationship between the assessment of research quality and its impact. More generally, robust assessment processes that could command the confidence of the social policy and social work academic communities were still a long way off.

A report of the seminar was sent to the panel convened by HEFCE to consider the outcomes of the pilots, and has also been published on the new SPA website. There will be a meeting to discuss REF developments at the SPA’s Lincoln conference in July.
The SPA has also been involved in discussions with the British Sociological Association (BSA) about the configuration of panels for the REF. Because so much sociological and social policy research is conducted in joint departments, the BSA has argued for a single, merged panel. Following consultation with SPA members last autumn, SPA’s view is that this would not be in the best long-term interests of social policy, a subject area that draws on a range of different disciplinary perspectives. A merged panel would also be very large, creating substantial workload challenges for panel members. A summary of the SPA’s position can be found on the SPA website. HEFCE has called a meeting of panel members. A summary of the SPA’s position can be found on the SPA website. HEFCE has called a meeting of the SPA, representatives from social work and criminology (the other two subject areas involved) and the BSA to try and resolve these differences. The REF meeting at the SPA’s Lincoln conference will include a report on current developments.

Caroline Glendinning

EXCELLENCE OR MEDIOCRITY? A REJOINDER

Caroline Glendinning’s note on the REF rightly emphasises the caution with which we must approach HEFCE’s proposals for the assessment of research ‘impact’. My fear, however, is that by participating in the pilot assessment exercise the social policy academic community may have become complicit in legitimating a form of assessment that will not promote excellence, but ensure mediocrity.

Let us be clear. Insofar as social policy is primarily an applied subject area, it is important that our research should have ‘impact’ and we should seek to be judged on the basis of our engagement with, and/or relevance to, substantive policy issues. But impact should not be construed according to some narrow utilitarian calculus and most certainly not solely in terms of any direct influence it might have had on policy or practice. HEFCE’s demand is that research must deliver “demonstrable benefits” to the economy, society, public policy and quality of life. It is a demand born of the managerialist performance culture promoted by New Labour. Whether this will be sustained under the Lib-Con coalition remains to be seen, but the portents are unpromising. There are three problems with the notion of ‘demonstrable benefits’.

Just how can benefits be demonstrated? As any social scientist knows, exact demonstrations of causality are at best difficult and often impossible. In the world of substantive social policy just who or what constituted a decisive influence can never be certain. It may be possible to determine who has contributed to debate and to trace the origins of particular insights and arguments, but policy making by its nature is a complex process and takes place in a multi-dimensional context. If social policy academics are to conduct their research with an eye to being able to claim credit for its substantive influence, this is likely to constrain academic co-operation and breed a corrosive culture of competition. The outcome will be damaging to the depth and breadth of scholarship in the subject.

What constitutes a benefit? Social policy research encompasses a spectrum of investigations, ranging from the local to the global; from small-scale project evaluation to large-scale survey work; from the practically grounded to the conceptually driven. All are valuable and each makes a contribution to a body of scholarly knowledge. But if preference must be accorded to those benefits that are immediately demonstrable, there will be a tendency to favour projects that can achieve results in the short-term and which are palpable in character. The risk is that the research agenda becomes trivialised. Ground-breaking discoveries whose impact will only become evident to future generations will be sidelined in favour of newsworthy gimmickry.

Who or what determines whether research can have impact? Research that generates critical, unwelcome or politically inconvenient messages that are rejected or ignored by policy makers will be deemed to have no impact. A system of assessment that rewards demonstrable influence within the policy making process would provide an incentive for policy-based evidence making; for research inflected towards the kind of questions and/or the kind of findings that are most likely to be acceptable to, and to be taken on board by, an incumbent administration. Social policy scholars have at times been close to the policy-making establishment. At others they have been excluded. However, it is a cardinal principle that academics should never become the compliant courtiers of the establishment, but must remain free to be troublesome priests. An essential element of the impact that social policy research should have lies in the challenge it may pose to mainstream policy debate; in its engagement with difficult questions that have been evaded by policy makers; in its substantive relevance rather than its procedural influence. This is not how HEFCE perceives ‘impact’.

The inherent and fatal flaws of HEFCE’s proposals and their threat to academic standards and freedom have not and could not have been sufficiently exposed by the pilot exercise.

Hartley Dean
Dear Prime Minister...

When the May 6 election was called in the UK, Policy World contacted a cross-section of its domestic membership in search of advice on various aspects of social policy for the leadership of the new administration. This was no easy task for our contributors given the pollsters’ suggestions of a close contest and the subsequent formation of the coalition government, but they rose to the challenge.

Gender

By the time this letter is published, the shape of the society you and your ministers are aiming to create will be clearer. A key issue facing you in this endeavour is the existence of serious inequalities in British society, which you have rightly highlighted.

You now have a chance to act on this, albeit in difficult circumstances. So the commitment in the coalition agreement to “concerted government action to tear down ... barriers [to social mobility and equal opportunities] and help to build a fairer society” is very positive.

I want to focus on one of these inequalities – gender (the social positions of women and men, rather than their biological differences). The coalition agreement focuses on specific areas such as equal pay and workplace discrimination. Action here is essential. But you could do much more.

For example, ministers’ promise to implement the Equalities Act 2010 is welcome. But this should be proactive and comprehensive. Gender impact assessments of policy proposals could be used as an opportunity for capacity building for all involved; and publishing them would encourage greater awareness amongst the public. Civil society bodies with relevant expertise such as the Women’s Budget Group could advise.

Gender analysis of policy proposals can be illuminating. At a time of public expenditure savings, you are nonetheless committed to raising the personal tax threshold to £10,000 per year for basic rate taxpayers. These combined priorities are likely to favour men, more of whom earn and have higher pay, and work against women, who are more frequent users and employees of public services.

Moreover, transferable tax allowances mean more tax-free income for higher earners in married couples (more likely to be men) just because they have non-earning/low-earning spouses at home (more likely to be women). But cuts in Child Tax Credit will remove money largely from women, usually the main carers. In this and other cases, it is therefore essential to examine the distribution of resources not only between households but also within them. This is one amongst many reasons why your government should examine all policy changes with gender in mind.

Fran Bennett
Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford

Child Benefit

Please do not abolish or cut Child Benefit. Child Benefit is a non means-tested cash benefit paid to all mothers (currently in 2010 at the rate of £20.30 for the first child and £13.40 for the second and subsequent per week). Child Benefit is an iconic benefit, almost the last representative of the universal, comprehensive scheme that Beveridge proposed in 1942 and implemented after WWII. The whole social security system in Britain has been struggling for decades against an onslaught of means-testing. Much of Beveridge’s National Insurance scheme has been occupationalised. The residue of unemployment insurance struggles on in the form of contributory based Job Seeker’s Allowance and Employment Support Allowance, but hardly any of the unemployed qualify. Beveridge’s contributory basic state pension is paid at a rate well below the level of means-tested Pension Credit. It is a sorry picture and one that has got no better than it was when Labour came to power in 1997 – 34 per cent of all social security spending is now means-tested – it was 13 per cent in 1948.

So Child Benefit is very, very important. It is the thin red line or Horatio holding the bridge. If it is destroyed then any hope that Britain’s welfare state will ever again look anything like what its founding fathers intended will go for ever. We will float away from the Nordic and continental model and back towards a Poor Law welfare state.

Child Benefit remains a keystone of universality in a social security system that has grown increasingly means-tested. If it is removed the whole universal edifice will come tumbling down. In fact Child Benefit is the heart of progressive universalism. Child Benefit serves many functions. It does help to reduce child poverty but its greatest value is in its contribution to solidarity - through it the state recognises the contribution that all parents make to society in child rearing. Child Benefit only contributes a small proportion of these costs but it is a welcome contribution, a secure source of cash for mothers and it undoubtedly benefits children. So hands off Child Benefit!

Professor Jonathan Bradshaw
Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York
from strengthening state capacity in poor countries. You should also continue the work of Gordon Brown by devising global health funds to ensure that poor countries not only have access to cheap medicine but also have the health service infrastructure to deliver such medicines. At the same time recruiting NHS nurses and doctors from Sub Saharan Africa must continue to be prevented and arrangements agreed to return trainee doctors to strengthened local capacity and improved salaries. The Global Social Floor being worked for by the ILO, WHO, UNICEF, UNDP etc is in the interests of UK domestic social policy as well as the world’s poor.

You should also resist from the notion that repatriating social policy to the UK from Europe is a progressive move. The UK needs to learn from the European experience that, for example, good final salary wage-related pensions, so long as there are adjustments to retirement age, are broadly sustainable and if copied would bring the UK in from the cold in terms of mending its broken pension and savings system. Borrowing the best from European social policy should motivate such a re-engagement with Europe.

Bob Deacon
Professor of International Social Policy, University of Sheffield

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

Dear Prime Minister

Prior to the election all the main parties agreed that poverty and inequality are damaging the fabric of our society and individual wellbeing. Your own party’s recognition of this is particularly welcome given the record of the 1980s. I now call on you to put tackling poverty and inequality at the heart of the coalition’s recovery strategy. The National Equality Panel report provides a sober analysis of the situation and some pointers for policy. These will require effective action by government however important the role of civil society.

The coalition proposes a “fair pay review in the public sector”. This welcome initiative should be extended to the private sector, which is the source of the excessive rewards culture. It should also address the gender pay gap, especially as it affects part-time workers. And it should be complemented by a fairer tax system, which places responsibility on the better off to shoulder the greater part of the burden of deficit reduction, while protecting those on low incomes as promised in the coalition agreement.

Please do not allow the Conservative Party’s preoccupation with supposed ‘welfare dependency’ to blind you to the need to improve the benefits system itself for those who will continue to rely on it, however successful your welfare-to-work programme. In particular, I hope that the party’s criticisms of the extension of means-testing will translate into measures to protect and strengthen the system’s universal elements (including Child Benefit) – after all universal welfare is the embodiment of the principle that ‘we are all in this together’. And the same principle, together with the coalition’s welcome commitment to the eradication of child poverty, should encourage you to review the adequacy of social security benefits so as to ensure that all members of society (including asylum seekers) are able to achieve a standard of living sufficient to ensure human dignity. Finally, the development of institutional mechanisms to ensure the genuine participation of people living in poverty in decision-making that affects their lives would be a tangible expression of the ‘power revolution’ promised by the coalition government.

Ruth Lister
Professor of Social Policy, Loughborough University

NORTHERN IRELAND

Dear Prime Minister

From a Northern Ireland (NI) perspective, the hope has to be that the new government will be more willing to take into account the particular circumstances of the region than was the last. As a society still emerging from decades of conflict, where the areas most affected by that conflict were also the poorest parts, policy initiatives that might be made to fit other regions may not work here.

Welfare-to-work policies are a good example of this. On the one hand, some of the problems facing such policies in NI are similar to any peripheral region of the UK, for example a lack of jobs – especially good quality jobs – for claimants to move into and poor public transport infrastructure to help people get to jobs.

Some of the problems, though, are specific to the region. There is no childcare strategy for NI, not even an early years strategy, though one of each has been promised since the early days of devolution. According to the monitoring poverty and social exclusion reports for NI, childcare here is the most scarce and expensive of any UK region outside of London. In spite of this, welfare reform provisions for lone parents here are word-for-word those for lone parents across Scotland, Wales and England.

The epidemic of mental ill-health in NI is the exceptional circumstance that most needs to be taken into account. At least three times as many people have serious mental ill-health than in other parts of the UK and most of this is closely associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and the ‘ripple effect’ of the conflict. Levels of mental ill-health have soared since peace was established. It seems those who remained resilient during ‘the Troubles’ have fallen apart now that they’re over.

For many of these people, good quality work would be a blessing and help their recovery. But coercion is more likely to cause greater stress and set them back. The new Westminster government needs to understand that and legislate accordingly.

Goretti Horgan
School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy, University of Ulster
IMMIGRATION AND RACE

Dear Prime Minister

How about showing leadership for a change? Most prime ministers have been content to interpret leadership as following the lead of the Daily Mail and the Sun, pandering to lies, distortions and popular prejudices when it comes to ‘race’ and immigration, afraid to confront the myths which provide a platform for fascist parties such as the BNP.

One of your predecessors asked us to concentrate on evidence-based policy; nowhere is that more important than in the territory of ‘race’ and immigration. So, let’s go for some evidence. Let’s start by distinguishing between Black and Minority Ethnic groups, immigrants and migrant workers. Almost one half of all members of Black and Minority Ethnic groups here were born and bred in the UK; they are not immigrants. Most of them are second or third generation descendants of workers invited here after the WWII to help in the process of economic reconstruction. Without them, we would have no NHS, public transport or fast food, and the textile industry and car manufacturing would have collapsed long ago.

Secondly, only 10 per cent of the UK population was not born here (and that includes white South Africans, Australians and Canadians, for example). We do not support a disproportionate number of immigrants. The corresponding figures for other countries are 25 per cent for Australia, 20 per cent for Canada, 14 per cent for France and 12 per cent for the USA. And if you look at refugees seeking asylum, per head of the population or per GDP, we have far fewer than 20 other countries including countries with relatively poor economies such as Pakistan, Iran and Tanzania.

Thirdly, migrant workers do not take more from the economy than they put in, nor do they ‘steal our jobs’. A8 migrant workers constitute 0.9 per cent of the UK population but contribute 1.0 per cent of government revenue. They keep down the dependency ratio, thus reducing pressure on the benefits system. In the last 13 years, when migration from refugees and A8 migrants has been at a peak, 1.2 million more British workers have had jobs and the total employment rate has remained stable at 73 per cent. Actually, foreign workers create British jobs.

Next time you have to use the health service or public transport (fat chance that), want your house cleaned or your elderly mum cared for, you might be singing a different tune.

So go on, tell the truth - I dare you.

Gary Craig
Professor, University of Durham

THE BIG SOCIETY

Dear Prime Minister

Increasing self-reliance within society is high on the political agenda. ‘Self-help’ may seem a legitimate and appropriate goal, but the form this takes is crucially important. We know an emphasis on individual self-help can leave vulnerable people feeling isolated and unsupported. ‘Collective’ self-help or ‘mutual aid’ can be an antidote, but this requires special conditions that cannot be said to consistently exist.

We may desire the kind of society in which self-help and mutual aid features strongly and is reflected in institutions such as civil associations, mutual societies and co-operatives. However, such a role for society cannot be defined nor dictated from above. Government can merely facilitate change - and from where we stand today, this must necessarily be seen as a long-term project.

Moreover, replacing the ‘big state’ and ‘big markets’ with the ‘big society’ may seem attractive but it risks falling into the same traps - when each way of organising gets too big, problems become inevitable. Increased self-help must therefore be accompanied by intelligent thinking about the ongoing role for both the state and markets in ensuring none of our core values - liberty, equality and fraternity - are unduly prioritised to the detriment of the others.

Richard Simmons
Department of Applied Social Science, University of Stirling

HEALTH

Dear Prime Minister

There are many similarities between the health elements of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifests, and indeed some similarities with Labour’s past policy and manifesto intentions (choice, plurality etc). Both manifestos contain some good ‘little ideas’. However, I am not sure that I can see a ‘big idea’. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The NHS has seen major structural change over recent years, and some organisations such as Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) are still finding their feet after mergers, which tend to result in paralysis and rarely deliver the promised efficiency savings.

It will be difficult to translate some slogans and soundbites into policy. Campaigning in poetry (for example, white coats = good; grey suits = bad) is easy and popular, but you will necessarily govern in prose. The Liberal Democrat suggestions of cutting the Department of Health by half and abolishing the Strategic Health Authorities (SHAs) risks focusing on the paperclips, and failing to get to grips with the major clinical variations and ‘postcode lottery’ that still characterises the NHS. Now is probably not the right time for another major reorganisation, although you could show the PCTs and SHAs a ‘yellow card’ while reinvigorating practice-based commissioning. However, there may be some scope to streamline the regulatory system.

You will also need to square the circle in some of your policies. Both coalition partners stress more power to both patients and clinicians, but there are tensions here. Many patients value their local hospitals, while much clinical opinion favours centralisation in larger more distant hospitals. There are also conflicts between your suggested mechanisms of accountability. The Liberal Democrats favour elected health bodies, but localism necessarily implies differentiation, which is difficult to square with your shared emphasis on ‘fairness’. The Conservative proposal to create an independent board to commission care - a national unelected quango - goes against decentralising power, and has been termed by your new best friends the ‘Child Support Agency of the NHS’. As the previous government found out, there is often no ‘third way’ in difficult choices.

Martin Powell
Professor of Health and Social Policy, University of Birmingham
Dear Prime Minister,

In undertaking your inevitable review of long-term public spending and tax policy you must facilitate an open and fundamental discussion about the future of social policy and its funding. The nature and scale of our current welfare state is unsustainable in the light of the deficit reduction policy to which you are now committed. To retain it requires significant changes to what we do and how we pay for it. It needs a full and honest debate of the kind the past election failed to produce. Let me give three examples.

In the Autumn you will receive the report reviewing higher education (HE) funding. This will be a test case for you. Deep cuts in spending on HE would endanger a crucial part of any long-term recovery. To return universities to primary dependence on the taxpayer in a time of fiscal famine would be disastrous. There is a progressive alternative. It is to charge a realistic real interest rate on the delayed fee payments students make and to ask graduates to share equally with the taxpayer the cost of their education. Universities’ income could be sustained and the major additional burden would fall on those with well above average future earnings.

You need a major new source of revenue. One way to achieve that would be to increase the level of VAT and to extend it to food. The most developed welfare states in Europe – Sweden, Norway and Denmark do so – levy VAT at 25 per cent with lower rates for food. Even at a rate like 22 per cent this would raise large sums of revenue because the tax cannot easily be avoided. Its impact on lower income groups can be mitigated by using part of the proceeds to increase social security payments.

Another major contribution has to come from increasing the age to which people work further and faster than planned. People may be given a choice of the ways in which they fund their long-term care but not a choice about doing so.

Howard Glennerster
Professor Emeritus of Social Administration, London School of Economics

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SCOTLAND

Dear Prime Minister,

Writing to you from Scotland, in the light of the election results, feels more than ever like a letter from a foreign country. The reason your party is a political nonentity here is because Scottish voters have still not forgiven it for the economic wasteland and social devastation caused by the policies of Conservative governments in the 1980s and ‘90s. There are many other parts of the country that feel the same way. If you genuinely want to mend ‘broken Britain’ and be Prime Minister of one nation then you must be sincere about rejecting the socially divisive policies of the past.

We are in a period of austerity with demanding political choices. As the social protection budget is the largest area of UK government spending, it may seem an attractive target for cuts; but there is no moral justification for asking the most vulnerable to pay the price for a banking collapse and recession which they played no part in causing. Indeed, if you want to avoid a situation like Greece, where disputes over who will bear the burden of spending cuts is challenging the legitimacy of government itself, your first priority should be to reduce the inequalities of income and wealth which successive UK governments have allowed to widen. The spirit of co-operation which saw cross-party support for the Child Poverty Act can be maintained if you commit your government to abiding by the recommendations of the Child Poverty Commission and enacting a comprehensive child poverty strategy. However it would be a good idea to persuade your coalition partners in the Liberal Democrats to abandon their proposal to increase the personal allowance for Income Tax to £10,000, which will not help those on the very lowest incomes.

Finally, Prime Minister, please remind your colleagues that some policies might be expensive but words are cheap, and should be chosen carefully. ‘I’ve got a little list’ (actually, it’s rather long) of things which made the Conservatives the nasty party in the past; I hope I won’t need it again.

Stephen Sinclair
Scottish Poverty Information Unit, Glasgow Caledonian University

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Welcome to the summer edition of Policy World’s postgraduate pages. For this edition we have invited postgraduates to write a letter to the new British Prime Minister, to address research issues, and call for some fresh approaches. I am delighted to introduce three researchers: Lee Gregory (University of Cardiff), Lucy Mayblin (University of Warwick) and Ruth Patrick (University of Leeds). Lee discusses the possibilities for Debt Redemption and Money Advice schemes, Lucy highlights the need for a review of policy for asylum seekers, and Ruth calls for alternative markers of adult citizenship in the UK today. I have taken the opportunity to contribute my own letter to David Cameron, in order to highlight the challenges experienced by contemporary doctoral researchers.

In other news, the annual SPA conference at the University of Lincoln will take place in July. There will be a large contingent of postgraduates attending, both as presenters and audience members. Keep an eye out for the conference timetable. As well as attending conference presentations, three events may be of particular interest to you. There is a Special Interest Group meeting specifically for postgraduate delegates, and this will be an important chance to contribute to discussions about what the SPA can do for you. A drinks reception prior to the conference dinner will provide an excellent opportunity for you to meet your peers and established social policy academics. Finally, a symposium on ‘teaching and learning’ issues will present findings from this year’s SPA/Social Work and Policy (SWAP) survey into the experiences of social policy postgraduates who teach. We invite you to attend and add your own experiences and ideas. If you haven’t yet booked your place at the conference, take a look at the SPA website for details (www.social-policy.org.uk).

I look forward to meeting you at the conference if you plan to attend. If not, but you feel there are any issues that the SPA should know about, please get in touch with me via email (r.dobson00@leeds.ac.uk).

Rachael Dobson
Postgraduate Representative, SPA.
DEBT AND FINANCIAL EXCLUSION

Dear Prime Minister

The support for the Debt Redemption and Money Advice scheme provided through credit unions in Wales offers an opportunity to people in acute financial difficulties and rent arrears. By underwriting loans the scheme allows a credit union to provide loans to people in extreme financial difficulty. This can be used for rent arrears, one-off ‘lumpy’ expenses or urgent bills, such as utility bills. Furthermore the scheme also provides a consultation with a financial advisor who is able to help financially excluded people by offering advice that they would otherwise be unable to access. Combined with the loan this scheme offers an effective way of tackling growing debt problems and can build partnerships between credit unions, the Citizens Advice Bureau and local authorities. Additionally, as part of the loan arrangement applicants become credit union members offering them beneficial services and the opportunity to save through the credit union once their loan is re-paid. As such it deals with the current problem whilst developing a long-term strategy for debt management. For a small amount of investment government could support the development of this service across the UK and help tackle growing debt problems of the financially excluded.

Lee Gregory
University of Cardiff

WORK AND CITIZENSHIP

Dear Prime Minister

I’m sure you’re very busy, what with sorting out the economy and trying to decide which of our public services to cut hardest and fastest, but it would be really great if you could spend a few minutes brainstorming the consequences of the current obsession with paid work as the marker of adult citizenship. I know all you politicians think that paid work can be transformative, helping individuals bring meaning, money and motivation to the lives of themselves and their children, but I sometimes wonder whether this also applies when the jobs that we are talking about are all too often low-paid, low-skilled and insecure. It would be great for you to also spend just a little time thinking about the consequences of this elevation of paid work for those who cannot or choose not to participate in formal employment, such as carers, much of the elderly population and many disabled people. If you and your cabinet could explore these issues, and consider whether we as a nation should also value other forms of contribution, be it caring, volunteering, parenting and participating as service users, I would be most grateful!

Ruth Patrick
University of Leeds

ASYLUM SEEKERS

Dear Prime Minister

As I am sure you are aware, life for asylum seekers in the UK at present is very hard. Five rafts of primary legislation since 1997 have stripped asylum seekers of the right to work, the right to normal benefits, and the right to arrive in the country without legal travel documents (in contravention of the 1951 Geneva Convention). A list of ‘safe’ countries has been drawn up so that people fleeing these countries may not apply for asylum whatever has happened to them, and ever-narrower definitions of asylum have been employed – effectively limiting access to the right to asylum itself. Asylum seekers, including children, can be arrested and detained without charge, their appeal rights are limited, and failed asylum seekers have no rights at all, they are left destitute. I believe that how we treat the poorest and most desperately in need is an important measure of the moral worth of our nation. For this reason, Prime Minister, I ask you to cease the systematic targeting of asylum seekers for social, economic and political exclusion, and promote pride in the tradition of sanctuary, whatever the short-term implications for your personal popularity.

Lucy Mayblin
University of Warwick
One important initiative was the creation of a whole of government Social Inclusion Agenda. This included the establishment of a Social Inclusion portfolio (led by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon. Julia Gillard MP) within which a number of priorities were identified. These were:

- supporting children at greatest risk of long term disadvantage by providing health, education and family relationships services;
- helping jobless families with children by helping the unemployed into sustainable employment and their children into a good start in life;
- focussing on the locations of greatest disadvantage by tailoring place-based approaches in partnership with the community;
- assisting in the employment of people with disability or mental illness by creating employment opportunities and building community support; and
- addressing the incidence of homelessness by providing more housing and support services.

Of these, addressing disadvantage among Indigenous Australians is perhaps the most significant - and contentious – issue for social policy.

Indigenous issues
The multiple disadvantages that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have encountered since European settlement has produced a complex history for social policy in Australia. A particular, and recurring, dynamic of Australian social policy is that Indigenous Australians are subject to policies and practices over which they often have little say. This was particularly the case in the ‘NT Intervention’ instigated by the former Howard government. In response to the Northern Territory report into child sexual abuse - Ampe Akelyneman Meke Makarle (Little Children are Sacred), the Howard Government declared a national emergency in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, and in 2007, instigated the intervention, which involved sending police and the army into remote communities, banning alcohol, issuing mandatory health checks for Aboriginal children and withholding welfare payments to more than 70 communities in the territory. Most Aboriginal groups and many non-Indigenous Australians condemned the heavy-handed approach of the intervention, which had the support of Rudd’s Labor government who were then in opposition.

In what many regarded as a political U-turn, the following year the Rudd government instigated what has been perhaps the most significant development in Indigenous policy. As the government’s first order of business in February 2008, the Prime Minister issued a long overdue apology to Indigenous Australians for the stolen generations; children forcibly removed from their families by government agencies and church missions. In response to criticisms that the apology would do little to alleviate disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people, the Rudd government pledged a commitment to ‘closing the gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of health, education, employment and living conditions while respecting Aboriginal self-determination. With a budget of AUD$5.4 billion from the Council of Australian Governments, six key targets have been identified to attempt to reduce the gap in life chances and life expectancy between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

These targets are to:

- close the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation;
- halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018;
ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities by 2013;

- halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement for Indigenous children by 2018;

- halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and


These targets provide the baseline against which to measure year-on-year progress. In 2010, little discernible progress has been made, and a recurrent criticism of the targets is that they require between 10 and 20 years from the baseline set in 2008 before they will be achieved.

Immigration and citizenship

Immigration remains a contested topic for Australian social policy. The racially motivated mob violence of the Cronulla Riots in Sydney in 2005 highlighted simmering racial tensions in the nation, with ‘un-Australian’ becoming shorthand for ‘racist’. More recently, the Federal government has revised the policy on skilled migration, prompting accusations that this would unfairly disadvantage foreign students. Under the changes, the list of occupations from which applicants are selected will be shortened, and reviewed annually, and potential new migrants will need to demonstrate significantly better English language skills. The changes will mean about 20,000 people will have their migration applications cancelled and their fees refunded at a cost of about AUD $14 million. The changes will leave thousands of overseas students facing uncertainty, with many losing the chance to apply for permanent residency because the job for which they are studying will no longer be on the skilled list. The policy has received considerable criticism for what some commentators perceive to be the racially motivated nature of the changes. The changes come as Australia faces criticism in the overseas education market which has been damaged by a string of attacks on Indian students.


Workplace reform

Workplace issues have long been key to the political debate in Australia. The Labor government (under Bob Hawke and Paul Keating) sought to achieve change through a formal accord with the trade union movement. Under the accord, the government began a process of labour market reform which involved greater flexibility in the labour market by allowing non-union agreements in the workplace. Following its election in 1996, the Conservative Liberal-National coalition government took a more hard line approach to workplace reform. Under the coalition, workplace reform took the form of unilateral actions by employers rather than collective agreement with the unions. The unpopularity of the Work Choices Act is widely regarded as a major factor in the defeat of the Howard government in 2007.

Despite the fact that the Rudd Labor government won the last federal election with a promise to reform labour law, there are a number of issues on which both parties are now in agreement. These include a national industrial relations system, enterprise-level bargaining, a broader scope for individual agreement making and the role of awards as providing a safety-net of wages and working conditions and a base from which further bargaining can occur.


Pension review

In 2008, the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs commissioned a review of Australia’s pension system. The review was significant as it called into question the adequacy of the aged pension (as opposed to eligibility). The review examined the basic structure of Australia’s pension system and found that pension rates do not fully recognise the costs faced by single pensioners living alone, particularly for those renting privately. The review recommended an increase in the Age Pension age as a response to the increase in life expectancy for Australians and the consequent growing duration of retirement. The review found that more consideration needs to be given to the indexation arrangements of the pension to recognise the differing life circumstances within the aging population. The central question for the review was the level at which the full rate of pension should be set. The review found that where a pensioner couple live in their own home or rent from a public housing authority, and do not experience major ill health or disability, the pension rate is adequate. The current relatives, however, between single and couple payments do not take into consideration the costs faced by single pensioners who live by themselves and the relatives should be increased.

A central policy question in implementing reform to these relativities was whether the current two-tier structure of paying single pensioners and pensioner couples different rates should continue, or whether a three-tier structure (single pensioners living alone, single pensioners who live with others and pensioner couples) should be used.


Health

In March, Prime Minister Rudd released his health policy which involves a staggered take over of responsibility for hospital funding from the Commonwealth government. Primary health care will become the sole responsibility of the Federal government. The move is not popular with the State governments, as it leaves them with reduced responsibility; now essentially the administrative functions of hospitals. The move incorporates the local focus on health that Opposition Leader Tony Abbott has argued for as it allows the opportunity for clinical decisions – and funding – to be made at the hospital or regional level. Nonetheless, the decision has sparked the threat of a referendum or double dissolution election. Subsequent policy announcements between now and the next election are likely to focus on extra beds, doctor and nurse training, support for GPs, and the introduction of electronic patient record monitoring.


Catherine Palmer
Durham University
A Research Chair in Social Policy at the University of New South Wales and former Director of the Social Policy Research Centre, Professor Peter Saunders was elected President of the Australian Social Policy Association in November 2009. In this interview with Catherine Palmer, he shares some thoughts on social policy in Australia.

What is your assessment of the state of play regarding social policy in Australia? I think it’s a good time for social policy - the current government has a much more considered approach to it. Under most previous governments, social policy has played a second cousin to a strong economy. Under the Rudd government, social inclusion has been at the centre of the social policy agenda - they have managed to bring in some big initiatives. The global financial crisis, however, has taken the attention of policy makers, with social policy being somewhat on the back burner.

Rudd was on the TV programme ‘Q&A’ last night. He was the only speaker and his insistence on ‘basing policy on evidence’ was quite encouraging for social policy. But, I’ve been quite disheartened by the insistence on ‘basing policy on evidence’ which was quite encouraging for social policy. But, I’ve been quite disheartened by the climate change debate. Given the kinds of problems we deal with and the judgments we have to make to set policy, social policy is not going to get the kind of consensus around evidence-based policy that we see in the climate change debate.

What are the key debates that Australian social policy is currently engaged with? There are two key developments in which social policy is playing a role. One is the ‘My School’ website. This is a government-backed website that allows schools to be compared with others, and ranked on an index of ‘school and community disadvantage’. How this index is constructed is up for debate. I’ve always argued that it should include indicators of ‘social exclusion’, particularly if we are using these measures to make real change. We see the composition of similar sorts of indices happening in higher education (HE) where the government has a commitment to increase the proportion of students from low socio-economic areas from 15 to 20 per cent. Again, I think we should include indicators of social exclusion, and try and make changes at school level for a transition to HE combined with the allocation of more resources.

The other is the Pension Review, where the adequacy of the age pension was reviewed. It’s been widely felt that single pensioners (as opposed to those receiving the married rate) were doing it tough, and a government inquiry considered evidence that suggested that the single pension was low relative to other OECD countries. In Australia, they receive around 60 per cent of the married rate compared to between 64–70 per cent elsewhere. The review recommended an increase, and the government announced an across the board increase of 10.6 per cent for single pensioners. What was significant about this was that it was the first time there was any serious discussion of the adequacy of payment as distinct from eligibility. I still think they need to try and differentiate the increase by the circumstances of different groups of pensioners rather than the across the board approach. What we’re finding is that pensioners who are renting are doing much worse than homeowners.

How would you describe social policy in Australia? The discipline of social policy is in a good state in Australia. It doesn’t have anything like the history in the UK - it wasn’t taught in HE until some of the newer universities started to look for topics that fell between the standard issues dealt with by social sciences such as sociology, economics, psychology and demography. That’s produced a generation of students who’ve become researchers, academics, policy makers, and who work for NGOs. The social policy scene in Australia is very healthy, and there is an open relationship between bureaucrats, academics and NGO’s. We see this particularly at our social policy conference where attendance can be broken down into those three groups, with the smallest group being academics. I think this makes for a more interesting and diverse group.

Any challenges for social policy? One of the challenges is the role of State and Federal governments, which presents problems for policy coherence and for the quality of programmes. The income support system is handled by the Federal government but the services related to systems – health, social care – involve both State and Commonwealth governments. If we take the example of Medicare, that’s funded federally through general revenue and through the Medicare Levy, but much of the provision lies with the States. There is a constant struggle between State and Federal governments in terms of cost shifting, which has implications for the system as a whole.

So, if we just think about institutional care, nursing homes are funded either by the Commonwealth or privately, hospitals are funded by the States and the community care sector is funded by both the States and the Commonwealth. We are trying to
work with a system that is funded by both the States and the Commonwealth - Federally-funded and State-funded at the same time. This makes reform difficult.

I think we’ve made significant progress with the ‘Closing the Gap’ initiative, which by 2020 is hoping to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of things like child mortality, health and unemployment. But this again requires co-operation between the Federal and State and Territory governments, often creating a stalemate for serious policy reform and for integrating different programmes.

We got through the global financial crisis without any big impacts. Unemployment never rose above 6 per cent. Technically, we never had a recession or negative economic growth. Part of the reason for this was that the Rudd government made several one-off payments to those living on incomes below a ceiling or on social security benefits. This was designed to stimulate consumption spending. There was also a roll-out of infrastructure projects – schools, community regeneration projects such as new roads – which helped us avoid the recession. The other reason was our dependence on China, particularly with mineral exports. The Chinese economy didn’t really dip, and they kept a mineral boom going in Australia. Despite saying that we are not a farm or mine for the rest of the world, mineral exports to China helped the economy.

Finally, what advice would you give to new graduates keen to get into social policy? There are lots of research institutes for social policy in Australia. The Social Policy Research Centre has about 70 staff, and there are other research centres of similar size. The NGOs also have their own research units as do State and Federal governments. Social inclusion units are part of the Federal government, while at a State level they are part of the Department of Premier and Cabinet - so part of a central agency, like the UK, I think.

Fifteen years ago social policy jobs didn’t really exist – they have mushroomed in the last 10 years. It’s a growing field, it’s established as an academic discipline, and we’ve turned out lots of graduates. I think it’s an exciting field to study. The kinds of issues we’re grappling with require research and analysis skills, an understanding of history, politics, and institutions. It’s a real mix.

**PERFORMING POLICY: THE EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL POLICY**

On Tuesday 9 February 2010, the Social Policy Unit of the University of Queensland (UQ) hosted a one-day symposium entitled ‘Performing Policy: the everyday experience of social policy’ on the University grounds in Brisbane - co-sponsored by the SPA and the UQ Institute for Social Science Research.

In keeping with the event’s focus on the performance of policy, professor Michael Lipsky, author of the seminal book Street Level Bureaucracy, was keynote speaker. Lipsky’s involvement generated considerable interest in the symposium which drew 60 participants from Australia, Sweden and Austria and from academic, government and human service workers. Paper presenters ranged from doctoral students to professors.

Many social policy academics at UQ actively research what policy means in practice, and are keen to promote ways of thinking about social policy beyond its formal manifestation. A post-modern perspective emphasises that the reality of policy is constituted in its performance - consistent with Lipsky’s observation that street level bureaucrats make policy. Examining policy as performance brings to light activities of street level bureaucracy, administrative processes and procedural justice; the intersection between formal legislation and real lives and spaces of discretion; the effects of complex policy and administration; the delivery of policy and the treatment of users with respect or otherwise and emotional dimensions of policy; and practices of surveillance and compliance management. Ultimately all these aspects constitute social citizenship.

Reflecting on the 30 years since the publication of Street Level Bureaucracy, Lipsky began by saying that the symposium was unique - he had not previously been involved in or aware of any similar event on the nexus between policy and its delivery. He also observed that the nature of public services and public sector management had changed in ways he had not anticipated when he conducted his research in the 1970s - particularly the large-scale contracting out of government-funded services. He saw it is important to investigate how this affects users of such services.

He also reflected on a key observation of his book, that street level bureaucrats make policy. He defended this view, but also made it clear that they are not the only ones who make policy. Another outcome of this observation is the question about how street level bureaucrats and their decision-making can be managed. This area has been central to management, and again Lipsky acknowledged that the activities of management in managing street level bureaucrats have changed enormously. In this, he referred to his more recent work on child protection workers as street level bureaucrats and their management. He emphasised the problems that can arise with management through an obsession with performance indicators, and expectations that such work can be routinised, and argued against such measurement stating it ends up biasing outcomes in ways that are often unproductive and unhelpful in such complex fields.

The rest of the day covered a range of policy domains and topic areas, including child, family and disability services; health and education policy; and policy technologies. A lively session on welfare-to-work included papers by Bettina Leibetseder (University of Lents) and Rickard Ulmestig (Linné University) on the transformation of social assistance processes in Austria and Sweden respectively, followed by an examination of welfare-to-work reforms in Australia by Yvonne Hartman and Sandy Darab (Southern Cross University). The impact of welfare-to-work on sole parents was further examined in a separate session by Megan Blaxland (University of New South Wales) and Teresa Grahame (UQ).

Several papers examined the extent and experience of service coordination among human services organizations and what this meant for service users. Australian disability services were particularly notable for their fragmentation and complexity (Michele Harris, Griffith University; Kathy Buckley and Deborah McIntyre, UQ).

The issue of fair access to income and credit was also covered, with David Baker and Richard Dennis (The Australia Institute) discussing the large number of Australians who don’t receive all that they are entitled to from Centrelink (Australia’s national social security agency), and the reasons why, Lynda Shevellar and Greg Marston (UQ) discussed the economic interdependency between the welfare state and the “fringe economy” - particularly the role of pay-day lenders in poverty management strategies.

A paper by Margaret Mitchell (University of Western Sydney) explored the unusual situation of street level bureaucracy “where there are no streets” in delivering services to remote Indigenous Australian communities. Other papers examined the increasing contribution of key performance indicators and evidenced-based policy in reconstituting street level practice (Ann Neville, The Australian National University and Adrian Cherney, UQ, respectively).

The day ended with a panel session comprising two academics (Lipsky and Jo Barraket, Queensland University of Technology) and two policy practitioners - Peter Humphries, Deputy National Manager of Social Work Services for Centrelink, and Ray Quinn, Manager of Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Services, Queensland Health. The practitioners’ insights into managing political demands, expectations and funding arrangements and the realities of people were of particular significance.

A book proposal focusing on the topics of the symposium for an international audience is being prepared.

Paul Henman
University of Queensland

www.social-policy.com
FORTHCOMING EVENTS

22-23 June 2010
Shaping the future: exploring impacts and changes to the student learning experience over the next five years.
Annual Higher Education Academy conference. De Havilland Campus, University of Hertfordshire.

5 July 2010
Symposium on Teaching Criminology, Liverpool Hope University. www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/events/new_event.htm?id=239.

7-9 July 2010

For more information on these and other forthcoming events visit www.swap.ac.uk/events

TEACHING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In March 2010 the Higher Education Academy in partnership with UKCISA (UK Council for International Student Affairs) launched a two year project -- The Teaching International Students Project (www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/teachingandlearning/internationalisation/internationalstudents).

Generic resources generated by this project so far include suggestions for helping international students make the most of groupwork, postgraduate supervision, academic writing, language issues and intercultural communication. These can be accessed via the International Student Lifecycle. (www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/internationalisation/TIS_StudentLifecycle.pdf).

If there are more subject specific resources you would like to see developed to help your international social policy undergraduate and postgraduate students make the most of their experience at university, please email us at swapteam@soton.ac.uk.

POSTGRADUATES WHO TEACH SOCIAL POLICY SURVEY

Presentation at 2010 SPA conference

This triple sponsored survey (SWAP/SPA/JUCSP) closed on 15 January 2010, with responses from 55 postgraduates at 22 HEIs. The findings will be first presented at this year’s SPA conference (5-7 July 2010, University of Lincoln) during a session focused on the teaching experiences of postgraduates who teach social policy. If you are attending the conference, come and join us. Feel free to bring along your experiences of teaching, or simply find out what postgraduates make of the teaching they are asked to do. Following the survey we plan to create resources informed by the findings, and we will sketch out what these might look like during the session.

A follow-up event for postgraduates who teach social policy will be held in early 2011.

WEB RESOURCES

Community Involvement, work based learning and social sciences
Staff and students at Sheffield Hallam talk about their experience of work based learning – in particular volunteering and working with children on placement.
Visit http://extra.shu.ac.uk/alac/CommunityInvolvement/workbasedlearning.html.

Social entrepreneurship in the social policy curriculum
Rob Gunn from the University of York talks about creating a level 2/3 option ‘Working in Organisations’. Following this presentation, delivered at the 2007 SPA annual conference, Rob also recently published a book – Social Entrepreneurship: A Skills Approach.
Visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZI_3Af5qY.

Principles of work-related learning
Sabine McKinnon and Anoush Margaryan of the Caledonian Academy, Glasgow Caledonian University, suggest five principles for designing work-related learning activities and describe examples of good practice in work-related learning at Glasgow Caledonian University (including a community links project based in the School of Law and Social Sciences).
Visit www.academy.gcal.ac.uk/realworld/documents/Principlesofwrl180909.pdf.

The scholarship of engagement
This C-SAP monograph, edited by Steven Curtis and Alasdair Blair, presents the main findings of a three-year project on research based placements which came to a close in June 2008. It includes models of excellence and best practice relating to placement learning, community engagement, citizenship and employability for students of politics and international relations that were discovered through the research.

Engaging with employers
This publication from SWAP includes articles on running a social policy internship module from John Brady at Anglia Ruskin University and on placing students in the voluntary community from Susan Deeley at the University of Glasgow.
Visit www.swap.ac.uk/docs/newsletters/infocus02_online.pdf.

Inclusion of the sites on this list does not constitute a recommendation in relation to the quality or currency of resources or information found on them.
Teaching substance use
A substantial output from one of SWAP’s funded projects has been the production of a series of learning and teaching resources. These include a learning and teaching guide (Social work and substance use: teaching the basics), two standalone helpsheets (Using substance use research tools in teaching and learning and Involving alcohol and other drug specialists in social work education) and three standalone information sheets (Key resources for teaching on substance use, Domestic violence and substance use in the social work curriculum, and Blood borne viruses and substance use in the social work curriculum).

Rachel Lart (senior lecturer in social policy at the University of Bristol) reviewed the potential usefulness of these outputs for social policy lecturers, and as a result produced an additional information resource sheet specifically for social policy academics teaching drugs and society courses.

These resources can all be accessed online at www.swap.ac.uk/resources/themes/curdev.html

ATTITUDES TO POVERTY: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Utilising a grant from SWAP and C-SAP, this project was established to demonstrate the potential of digitising some of the resources of the Heatherbank Museum of Social Work, curated by Research Collections at Glasgow Caledonian University. As part of this pilot project, more than 70 articles from the Poor Law Magazine have been made available in a searchable electronic format that we hope will be of use to students, academic researchers and potentially members of the public interested in researching their personal history (http://blogs.spokenword.ac.uk/poorlaw/about).

Quick access to web resources
As part of a redesign of its website SWAP has set up a new service for linking to online resources. SWAP’s social bookmarks provide easy access to hundreds of social work and social policy web resources. Visit the new SWAP ‘delicious’ account to search or browse the links (www.delicious.com/swapweb).
TOWARDS COMMON ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH?

SYMPOSIUM REPORT

In March of this year the Association of Research Ethics Committees (AREC), the Social Research Association (SRA) and the Academy of Social Sciences held an exploratory symposium attended by representatives from a range of learned societies – including the SPA – to discuss the possibility of devising a set of ethical principles for research which could be applied across the social sciences. AREC has asked those learned societies represented at the meeting to canvass the views of their members and feed back to a future meeting. Here, SPA representative Alex Collis reports back on the symposium, and encourages SPA members to consider the nature of SPA involvement in any future discussions.

Before diving into the inevitably thorny issue of what any set of ethical principles might eventually look like, the symposium saw a lively debate on whether this was an exercise worth persevering with. With many of the learned societies represented at the meeting currently working separately on updating their own sets of guidelines, would this joint exercise add anything other than an extra – and unnecessary – layer of complexity? And how general could these principles become before they lost any real depth of meaning and became largely inapplicable to the individual disciplines?

In the current climate, with researchers increasingly called on to demonstrate their integrity, having a consistent set of overarching core principles could bring significant benefits. The intention is certainly not to develop an ethical code with associated sanctions for failure to follow its recommendations, nor does AREC want to replace existing sets of guidelines. It should also be noted that the focus is not on research governance arrangements, but on ethical conduct of research. Those present at the meeting generally agreed that a set of common ethical principles could be particularly useful in multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary contexts where individual researchers or small organisations are often unsure of where to turn for ethical guidance, and instead have to pick and choose arbitrarily between guidelines issued by the different disciplines. An independent forum which allowed researchers, particularly those from smaller organisations, to share experiences of ethical issues encountered in their work and to learn from the experiences of others, could be of genuine value in reducing this uncertainty.

Where to from here?
The majority of those at the meeting felt it might be best to adopt a modular approach, rather than uncritically recommending the blanket application of a prescribed set of ethical principles, with the focus more on producing a set of statements about research conduct from which learned societies could then select as appropriate. The main difficulty which I have with the idea of formulating a set of common ethical principles, and which I – among others – expressed at the meeting, is that different disciplines inevitably view certain ethical issues very differently, and it is difficult to see how these interdisciplinary tensions could be resolved. How will concepts such as confidentiality, autonomy or informed consent be defined? Is this an insurmountable problem? What would be the value of these core principles if learned societies simply opted out of certain elements?

With the SPA’s recent publication of a revised set of guidelines on research ethics, and the ongoing debate this prompted (see Policy World Winter/Spring 2010 issue), members are well placed to make a significant contribution to this piece of work. I agree wholeheartedly with the point made by Paul Spicker and David Byrne that the applied nature of social policy research means that any set of guidelines which is ‘stitched together’ from other codes published by disciplines that are more concerned with disciplinary reputation and the advancement of knowledge fall somewhat short. We need to ask ourselves how the political context and ‘characteristically public’ nature of social policy research might influence our contribution to this interdisciplinary debate. Would it mean that the SPA was unable to sign up to any set of common ethical principles which might be developed?

I can foresee a number of points on which the view from social policy might diverge from the stance taken by other disciplines, and which will need to be made clear in future meetings. For example, the necessity of maintaining anonymity and confidentiality at all stages of a research project, regardless of a participant’s status, is not necessarily a realistic aim in social policy research due to its public nature. The duty to avoid harm may also be viewed very differently by other disciplines; as Spicker and Byrne also note, policy change which occurs as a result of research can have negative effects, and due to the critical focus of social policy research we should focus on justifying unavoidable harms whereas other disciplines are more focused on minimising avoidable harm. The need to consider the potential conflicts between the interests of research participants and a wider population of research subjects is particularly pertinent to social policy research ethics. There are other issues which need to be considered more fully – for example, what of the ethical considerations raised by the applications of new technologies to social policy research?

Use of the Internet as a medium for social policy research – only briefly touched upon in the revised SPA guidelines – opens up a whole new range of ethical complexities which demand further consideration. The differences from other types of research in relation to obtaining informed consent, confidentiality and security of data amount to more than mere ‘practical difficulties’, and I would argue that use of the Internet as a medium represents a more radical transformation of the research relationship – with major consequences for how we perceive processes of obtaining informed consent or issues such as maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

For now, it would be useful if any comments and thoughts on the above could be fed back to me (alex.collis@anglia.ac.uk) so that I can take forward the views of the SPA at future meetings, and then feed back to the Executive who will circulate information on any significant developments.

Alex Collis

ESRC ETHICS FRAMEWORK

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has updated its ethics framework. Drawing on the results of a consultation exercise conducted in 2009, the Framework for Research Ethics (FRE) responds to new legislation and amendments to existing acts and laws, and looks to make a clear link between governance and ethics. For more information visit www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk.
studies and critical race theory more often associated with critical scholarship from black academics and activists. These sessions were important spaces for engaging in challenging and sometimes uncomfortable discussions around multiple positionalities - social, professional and national. Cross-national comparisons were useful as many participants come from countries where there is no established ‘white studies’ field.

Conference participant Claire Dempster reflected on this more open format: “As a Family & Systemic Psychotherapist working in the NHS I was struck by how psychotherapeutic - particularly psychoanalytic - thinking and language was drawn on to explain processes around whiteness. The concepts and tools of psychotherapy are designed for particular purposes. Moving them from that domain is a change of application. Any conceptual framework, therapeutic or methodological includes ideas, terms and language steeped in rich and racialised history. Certainly this was part of the reason Potter and Wetherell (1992) examined their research tools as well as their topic in ‘Mapping the Language of Racism’.”

For me, examining whiteness has to address the concrete or material realities of life. The White Spaces? conference was an opportunity to examine whiteness, but it was also an occasion where unwittingly we ‘lived’ it too in coming together. There is a need to locate ourselves within these debates – in our relationships, communities and places of work. This avoids whiteness being something that other people do – a complicated version of ‘othering’. It is between these processes and their relationship to the content of what was said that we have much to learn. Avtar Brah captures it well, suggesting that learning about whiteness is “Not just acquiring knowledge but of deconstructing whiteness as a social relation, as well as an experiential modality of subject and identity.”

Say Burgin, who has since established the semi-autonomous postgraduate research arm of the White Spaces network, says of the ‘Dialogue and Debate’ session: “It offered a moment to engage with other conference participants on equal footing. It was crucial to the great success of White Spaces? in that it offered all of us a chance to debrief, to wrestle collectively with questions we had been chewing on for two days and to raise issues for future endeavours into whiteness studies. This session was more than a unique aspect of the conference; it offered an equally unique moment for postgraduate attendees to exchange ideas and criticisms with established academics and other professionals.”

Because of the external funding, conference organisers were able to support a further linked public event designed to prompt an addition to academic forms of engagement with the core conference themes. After the formal conference closed on the second evening we held a poetry reading event organised in cooperation with local voluntary arts group Black Cat Productions at the Old Red Lion pub in Leeds city centre. The poets Dorothea Smartt and Jane Liddell-King read from their recently published collections of poetry related to the conference themes of whiteness and the reproduction of racialised and gendered power - Smartt, Ship Shape, Peepal Tree Press (2008) and Liddell-King, Faces in the Void (2008) respectively. The event was attended by over 30 people, half of whom were members of the general public who had not attended the formal conference proceedings. The readings were followed by lively questions, answers and debate and enabled a broader audience to engage with the themes and issues considered at the conference.

Further initiatives emanating from the conference include the formal establishment of the network theme on ‘Social policy and change: state initiatives to displace whiteness’. This theme brings together work across politics, public policy, social policy and governance and cultural and historical sociology to consider the continuities and shifts in contemporary racialised governmentalities. When we talk about racialised governmentalities we are thinking about the logics, tools, techniques and mechanisms of contemporary governance across a wide variety of state formations. We are interested in how formal and informal state practices support the enactment of whiteness as a normative ideal, even as their policies ostensibly aim to combat racisms. This theme builds on important work done in UK social policy which can be traced back to Fiona Williams’s (1989) Critical Social Policy: An Introduction and later Gail Lewis’s (2000) Race, Gender and Social Welfare: Encounters in a Postcolonial Society.

Work already in progress under the theme explores the relationship of the policy turn to equality, diversity and human rights to the reproduction of whiteness as an organisational ideal. It also includes a special issue of the journal Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State, and Society, 17(4) edited by Shona Hunter, Elaine Swan (University of Technology, Sydney) and Diane Grimes (Syracuse University, New York) to appear in 2011.

The network website is now live at http://www.wun.ac.uk/research/white-spaces-network. Anyone interested in becoming involved in the network should contact Shona Hunter s.d.j.hunter@leeds.ac.uk for the broader network or Say Burgin hyO8snb@leeds.ac.uk for the PGR arm of the network.

References


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