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Cover illustration: stick of rock on sale at an Electoral Commission exhibition stand, during the 2004 party conference season. Photo: Reuters/Toby Melville.

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The articles in this issue illustrate how humanities and social science scholarship contributes to a wide range of topical issues, either through direct contributions to public debate, or through intriguing parallels.

How to Choose an Electoral System

The British Academy Policy Centre report on choosing an electoral system for the UK was launched on 10 March 2010. Its authors, **Professor Simon Hix**, **Professor Ron Johnston FBA** and **Professor Iain McLean FBA**, explain why it has turned out to be even more topical than it was when the Academy commissioned it.

IN THEIR 2005 election manifestos, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats both called for the House of Lords to become wholly or largely elected. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has now promised that the same commitment will appear in the next Labour manifesto. Unless one of the parties backtracks, the commitment will therefore appear in the 2010 manifestos of all three major parties. The House of Commons has voted for either an all-elected Lords or an 80% elected Lords, and rejected all other options as to the composition of the Lords, in its last round of votes on the subject. The (unelected) Lords themselves have voted to remain unelected.

A profusion of different electoral systems is now in use in the United Kingdom: for the Scottish Parliament, and Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies; for European Parliament elections (themselves different in Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK); for local councils in Scotland; for the Mayors of London and other places that have voted to have elected mayors; and for the London Assembly. No two of those systems are exactly the same, and voters have become confused when they have to vote using two electoral systems on the same day.

As to the Commons, the House itself voted in February 2010 in favour of a referendum, to take place in 2011, on replacing the current 'first-past-the-post' electoral system by the system known as Alternative Vote (AV). Other referendums are possibly on the horizon, including one on the constitutional future of Scotland.

There is no such thing as a perfect electoral system. Systems have different purposes, some of which are incompatible. The 'deep magic'

of social choice theory has shown that no system can meet certain sets of modest criteria simultaneously. Accordingly, every electoral system has some virtues; some defects; and some features which are virtues or defects depending on the speaker's point of view. The British Academy commissioned two political scientists (Simon Hix and Iain McLean) and a geographer (Ron Johnston) to produce a report for policy-makers, the media, and concerned citizens on the features of the different families of electoral systems. Almost every system we consider in our report is either in use somewhere in the UK or has been proposed for elections either to the Commons or to a future elected upper house.

Three families of electoral systems

The report classes electoral systems into three families. First, there are *single-member constituency systems*. These include first-past-the-post and AV. Typically, these systems preserve a clear link between the MP and her/his constituency, and usually lead to single-party government. On the other hand, they can produce highly disproportional outcomes, with some parties gaining far more or fewer seats than their shares of the vote. These systems also encourage parties and governments to focus their attention on a handful of swing-voters in marginal constituencies, who can have vastly divergent opinions on key issues to the majority of the electorate. And whether these systems deliver a

Figure 1. The authors of the report, at its launch on 10 March 2010: Angela Cummine (research assistant), Iain McLean, Ron Johnston and Simon Hix. Photo: M. Crossick.



clear majority to a single party is about to be tested. We show that the answer to this last issue depends on electoral geography. Canada, which uses first-past-the-post, has recently had a series of minority governments.

Secondly, there are *multi-member constituency systems*, such as the Single Transferable Vote (STV) and List systems (which themselves divide into closed-list and open-list systems). These have the opposite features to single-member district systems: they preserve proportionality, but sometimes at the expense of coalition government or a clear link between the legislator and the constituency. Some people prefer the compromises that arise from coalition government to decisive single-party government, and so will not see this as a potential ‘danger’ of proportional representation (PR). Also, attributing the allegedly strong constituency-link in British politics to single-member constituencies might be mistaken, as many countries with multi-member systems also have strong links between MPs and their local constituencies, as in Ireland for example.

Thirdly, there are *mixed-member systems*, as in Germany, New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, and London. Under these systems, some MPs are elected in single-member constituencies, and others in (large in some cases) multi-member constituencies in a way designed to secure overall proportionality, or something approaching it. Like multi-member systems, the more proportional these systems are, the less likely they are to produce single-party government. Additional features of these systems are that they create two classes of members, one with a constituency link and the other without, and they can be complex for voters and parties to navigate.

Technical issues

Some more technical (nerdy, anorakish) issues are surprisingly important, and policy-makers need to understand them if they are not to be surprised by predictable outcomes they did not expect. One such is: how big should multi-member constituencies be (i.e. how many representatives or seats there should be from each constituency); and should they be drawn specially to be equal in electorate (to have the same number of voters in each electorate), or drawn from existing administrative boundaries such as Scotland, London, or Yorkshire & the Humber (where voter numbers will vary according to different population size)? The bigger a multi-member constituency, the smaller a party’s share of the votes cast before it wins its first seat. That is an obvious matter of arithmetic, neither good nor bad in itself, but with interesting consequences. More subtly, if constituencies have different magnitudes (i.e. numbers of elected legislators), the electoral chances of small parties will be better in big constituencies than small ones. This can be observed in elections to the European Parliament, where the constituencies are the UK’s twelve standard regions. The largest of these (London, and South-East England) have more than double the number of seats of the smallest (North-East England, and Northern Ireland).

The second subtle issue is what scholars call ‘apportionment’. MPs come in whole numbers. Vote shares, and seat shares in multi-member constituencies, are fractions. The task is to fit the one into the other, and is not as straightforward as it looks. We explain the basic maths of

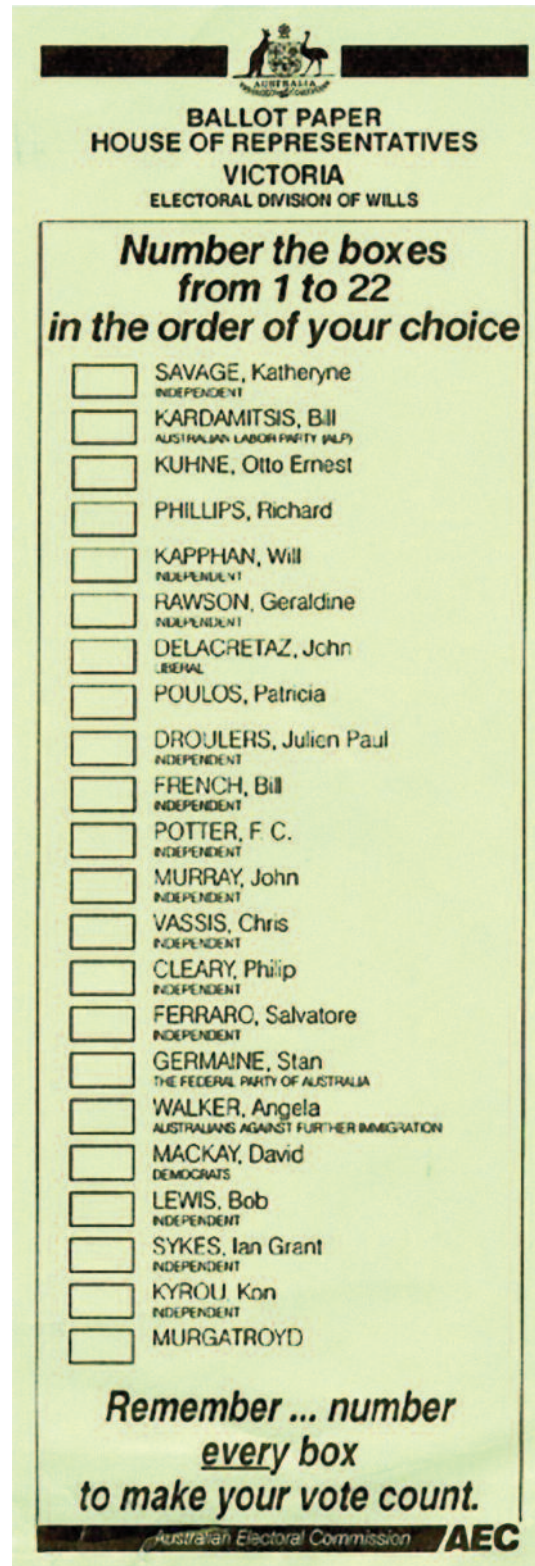


Figure 2. An Australian example of a ballot paper using the Alternative Vote system.



Figure 3. At the launch of the British Academy Policy Centre report, the former Chancellor and Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe, argued that the burden of proof rested with those who wanted to change the voting system for General Elections. Speakers at the launch also included Tony Wright MP (Chair, Public Administration Select Committee) and Paul Tyler (Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Constitutional Affairs).
Photo: M. Crossick.

apportionment. We show that there is only one fair system for assigning seats to each multi-member constituency, as the UK already has to do each time there is a European Parliament election. For the problem of assigning seats to the parties in a multi-member constituency after the votes have been cast, there are several different possible systems, each with its characteristic benefits and drawbacks, some of them not obvious on the surface, as we illustrate.

Practical manual

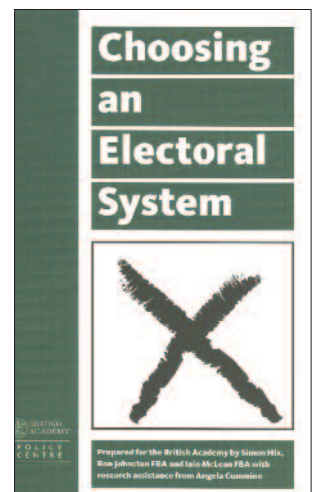
Our report is designed to be a practical manual. We describe and illustrate the salient features of the main systems and set out, briefly and with minimal technical detail, what adoption of any system implies for:

- the electorate;
- the parties; and
- the system designers and administrators.

We do not advocate any particular system, and neither does the British Academy. At the next election, voters will be assailed on all sides by politicians claiming that one system is 'the best'. You can bet that the best system for each political party is the system under which it calculates it will gain the most seats. Do not be taken in by such claims: check them against our report first.

Simon Hix is Professor of European and Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Ron Johnston is Professor of Geography at the University of Bristol. Iain McLean is Professor of Politics at the University of Oxford, and Official Fellow in Politics, Nuffield College, Oxford.

Choosing an Electoral System, a research report prepared for the British Academy by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston and Iain McLean, with research assistance from Angela Cummine, is available via www.britac.ac.uk/policy/



A 'Professor of Electoral Engineering': An election campaign in West Bengal

A new British Academy publication looks at 'Diversity and Change in Modern India', drawing on economic, social and political approaches. In her contribution to the volume, Dr Mukulika Banerjee provides an ethnography of an election campaign in West Bengal, based on a study of the elections won by the Left Front alliance of parties – including the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – between 1996 and 2005. The following extract describes her encounter with a particularly calculating electoral animal.

A more promising volubility was to be found in a well-known politician whom people had nicknamed the 'Professor of Electoral Engineering'. Curious about the mixed metaphors of erudition and pragmatism, I sought him out in Writers Building, where all ministerial government offices were to be found, just before the May 2001 elections. He was a cabinet minister and the party sergeant-major par excellence. He enjoyed the reputation of one who could be relied on to ensure that thousands showed up

at campaign rallies in Kolkata, and for facilitating voters to show up at the polls; rickshaw pullers for instance were known to vote out of sheer loyalty to this man. A large rough man, he spoke his mind loudly and clearly. The secrets of his popularity, he said, were basically two things: his extraordinary memory (exemplified in his ability to remember nearly 10,000 phone numbers off the top of his head) and his attention to maintaining relations with everyone 'from a cobbler to a Russi Mody'.¹

Describing the forthcoming campaign, the numbers flowed easily from his memory. He explained the party's general strategy with the help of the example of West Bengal's largest parliamentary constituency, whose electoral size was nearly 1.6 million. His assessment of this constituency went thus: he figured that the voter turnout would be about 75 per cent, i.e. 1.2 million voters would cast their votes. This meant they had to figure out how many of these 1.2 million votes would go to the LF [Left Front]. The largest number

of votes the LF had ever won in this constituency was 580,000 i.e. just under 50 per cent of the vote, and in the elections of the previous year, the LF had managed only 490,000. Thus, assuming that everyone who had voted for the LF at the last election would vote for them again, there was still a shortage of 90,000 votes from their previous best.

The strategy this time was therefore triangular, he explained. Though the Congress had won 120,000 votes the last time, he reckoned this time it would manage only 80,000. This time there was another candidate, an erstwhile independent but now the leader of the BJP in West Bengal. It was reckoned that he would win over 50,000 votes owing to his personal and social ties in the area. Another 20,000 votes would be spoilt votes. This took the number of votes the LF would not win to about 150,000. This left the LF with about 1,000,000 votes to play with, of which they required only 550,000. He concluded his assessment with an enigmatic smile and said, 'I have to ensure that we win those.'



Figure 1. A woman is helped to a polling station to cast her general election ballot in Nandigram, about 150 km southwest of Kolkata, 7 May 2009. Photo: Reuters/Jayanta Shaw.



Figure 2. Supporters attend an election rally by Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, chief minister of the Communist-ruled West Bengal, in Kolkata, 24 April 2006. Photo: Reuters/Jayanta Shaw.

did best – to serve basic needs, he argued. 'We show our support for the weaker sections and this is what makes them stronger.' But he also added to this lofty observation the rather patronising and widely used phrase among Communist leaders and cadres alike: *bostey diley chutey chai* i.e. if you invite them to sit down, they want to lie down. The implication of this remark was mainly that growing prosperity also changed needs and that people always want more, and that no amount of reforms were ever enough for an ever-demanding and needy population. Given that the Communists in West Bengal are among the very few Communists in the world who have (had to) survived in a robust democratic set-up, their characterisation of the fickle electorate should not come as a total surprise. Rather than being able to assume popular approval, this government had to constantly work harder at winning and maintaining their popular support.

And support for the party, even for veterans such as the minister, was as unpredictable as the waves in the sea. To him there were always various undercurrents and it was impossible to predict the next big wave. This was the reason why wooing the 5–10 per cent 'unreliable' voters was so crucial, he argued, because they could swing either way. To prove his point, he cited an example from the previous year when the LF had lost a safe local Panchayat seat in a place where the Municipality had actually done some excellent work. But even he was willing to admit that the incidents of excellent work were extremely uneven across the state, that it had been a while since the party or the government had done anything radically new to challenge the status quo, and that they had no truthful answers for West Bengal's abysmal development record, despite being the highest rice-producing state in the country.

Of course the main issue was precisely how he would 'ensure', especially given his party's reputation for 'scientific rigging'. He explained further. Of the required 550,000, he could safely assume that a large part of the 490,000 votes that had gone in their favour would do so again. For, he explained, in the industrial belt of the state, voting was a tradition; 'almost like a superstition and party loyalties are like football loyalties, there is no

logic behind this', he added. And he knew, like everyone else, that the most important part of the electorate for the Communists were the most disadvantaged sections of society, who had been the main beneficiaries during their regime.

The fight for the rights of the disadvantaged, for humanity, had been the *raison d'être* of their ideology and this was what socialism

As 'Professor of Electoral Engineering' the minister therefore had to deal with the twin problems of a capricious electorate on the



Figure 3. A man sleeps in front of graffiti in the city of Kolkata, 30 April 2009. For over three decades, India's West Bengal state has been run by the world's longest-serving democratically-elected Communist government. Yet the Communist power base is slowly being eroded by farmers alienated by aggressive plans to attract foreign and local industry. The graffiti depicts Mamata Banerjee, chief of regional political party Trinamool Congress, breaking West Bengal by opposing industry there. Photo: Reuters/Jayanta Shaw.

one hand, and a party running out of revolutionary ideas on the other. His solution therefore was to create the grandest spectacle that also carried people with it. This, he felt, could only be achieved by mounting a campaign that reached every voter and overwhelmed the electorate by its sheer and ubiquitous presence, and by having slogans that had an enduring message and carried a commitment behind them. Returning to the example he had used at the start of the conversation, he pointed out that in the forthcoming elections there were 70,000 new voters in this constituency, caused by improved voters' lists and first time voters. Of these, by the cadres' pre-poll estimation ('scrutiny') only 10,000 could be relied upon to vote for the LF. This left 60,000 of the new voters to woo but this would be whittled down to the more realistic figure of 50,000 because of 'erosion' (of party support). 60,000 votes, it will be recalled, was also the shortfall between the guaranteed 490,000 LF voters and the required 550,000 votes in this constituency.

After 'scrutiny' of these new voters and their backgrounds by the local cadres of all lists across the seven Assembly constituencies that made up this large parliamentary constituency, it was their assessment that about 40,000 of these votes, if cast, could be theirs, subject of course to the mounting of the 'grand spectacle' of a campaign mentioned earlier. The juggernaut of the party machinery would make this happen he said, but 'It is my job to make sure that these 40,000 voters actually vote'. This, as I observed for myself, was achieved on polling

day as a result of weeks of relentless pressure, in subtle and not-so subtle ways, of persuading people to cast their vote. The party hoped that their overwhelming campaign would keep the LF candidate foremost in the mind of the voter.

Concluding the discussion, the minister pointed out to me the irony in his account. 'All this huge election campaign is therefore mounted ultimately for those 40,000 voters', i.e. less than 5 per cent of the electorate, a story that was repeated across the state. And while he admitted that that is what electoral politics was about everywhere, there was also a veiled critique of the party and its policies. To his mind, the party's inability to recognise that they could not take the electorate's gratitude for granted and the need for revolutionary programmes to address people's growing needs was its biggest failure. 'Unless we are able to do this as a philosophy, as an ideology, we will continue to fail.'

This was a remarkably candid observation for a powerful leader of a seemingly invincible party on the eve of a confident campaign. But the Communist Party was also a complex organisation within which most individuals were merely cogs in the wheel. The minister had clearly managed to carve out his niche as the man on the coalface among the more urbane and cultured leaders who desperately needed him to fight the heat of an electoral battle. But his modest ministry, rough manner and place in the campaign also indicated that his career in the Communist Party was limited. While such men were crucial to the functioning of a mass based

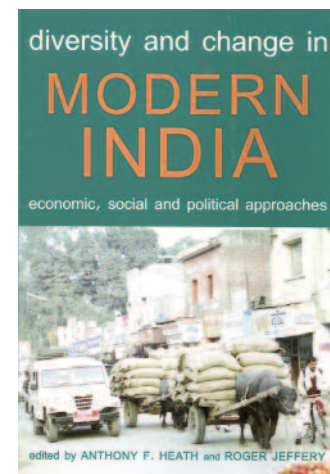
party such as the CPI (M), there was no room for such a personality in the ranks of its leadership. He must have realised this for his final ruminations were accompanied by a sarcastic smile: 'I can only guarantee that I will make sure our supporters show up to vote, but I cannot guarantee the result of the elections. But what I can guarantee are two things: "I cannot save the dead" and "I will never be a big CPI (M) leader".'

Note

1 Mody was the Tata chief in Jamshedpur for many years.

Dr Mukulika Banerjee is Reader in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics. She is completing a monograph (*Democracy: An ethnographic approach*) discussing the grass roots experience of democracy and political participation in village India (based on extended fieldwork); among other things, this asks why poor illiterate people vote with such enthusiasm. In 2009, she directed a multi-sited study *Comparative Electoral Ethnographies* (funded by the ESRC) that provided ethnographic description of local practices during the Indian general election.

Diversity and Change in Modern India: Economic, Social and Political Approaches, edited by Anthony F. Heath and Roger Jeffery (*Proceedings of the British Academy* volume 159) is published in April 2010. More information is available via www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/



New Labour and the British Constitution

In the last few months, the British Academy has hosted a range of events that have considered the state of the British constitution after 13 years with New Labour in power. Dr Andrew Blick offers some reflections on the significance – and limitations – of the constitutional changes, and of what is further proposed.

In his classic historical study of autocratic government, *Oriental Despotism*, published in 1957, Karl A. Wittfogel observed:

The development of a written constitution is by no means identical with the development of a ‘constitutionally’ restricted government. Just as a law may be imposed by the government ... or agreed upon ... so a constitution may also be imposed or agreed upon. The term *constitutiones* originally referred to edicts, rescripts, and mandates that were one-sidedly and autocratically issued by the Roman emperors.¹

On 10 June 2009, Gordon Brown, in a statement on ‘Constitutional Renewal’, told the House of Commons: ‘It is for many people extraordinary that Britain still has a largely unwritten constitution. I personally favour a written constitution.’ He was seemingly the first British Prime Minister ever to express such a sentiment. While Brown was correct to argue that ‘this change would represent a historic shift in our constitutional arrangements’,² as Wittfogel’s remarks suggest, it should not be assumed that as a matter of course a ‘written constitution’, if brought about, will be satisfactory – in form or content – from a democratic perspective. With this need for nuanced, critical assessment in mind, the following article considers the entirety of the



Figure 1. Dominic Grieve MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Justice, discussing ‘A British Bill of Rights’. The British Academy Forum on 8 March 2010 was organised in association with the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Photo: M. Crossick.

New Labour constitutional programme up to and including Brown’s ‘written constitution’ initiative, assessing what difference has been made, and what was the extent and nature of its impact.

During the successive premierships of Tony Blair (1997–2007) and Brown (2007–), New Labour has been active – even hyperactive – over the constitution. This approach led Sir John Baker FBA recently to argue in a lecture to the British Academy that Blair ‘had simply commandeered the constitution and put it on a par with immigration, defence procurement, or the health service, to be managed on a routine basis as an act of governmental power.’³

Changes since 1997

It is possible to detail a core set of substantial constitutional changes introduced since 1997. They include:

- Devolution to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London.
- The *Human Rights Act* 1998, incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into domestic law. The ECHR primarily enshrines civil and political rights, but there has also been limited development of economic and social rights, including through opting in to European Union Social Chapter and the establishment of the National Minimum Wage.
- Judicial reform, including the reduction of the role of ministers in judicial appointments and the establishment of an independent UK Supreme Court.
- The *Freedom of Information Act* 2000, providing a statutory right for individuals to apply for access to official information.
- House of Lords reform, in particular the removal of most hereditary peers, alongside some organisational and procedural changes in the Commons (with MPs recently voting to make select committees and the House timetable more independent of the whips).
- The establishment of a semi-official ‘Department of the Prime Minister’, coupled with a considerable reduction in the institutional support available to Cabinet.⁴
- Operational independence for the Bank of England.

A number of these changes were anathema to the Conservative Party when first proposed. It would not have introduced them and has plans to overturn or modify some of them, in particular the *Human Rights Act* – the Conservative plans for which Dominic Grieve, Shadow Justice Secretary, described at a British Academy Forum on 8 March 2010.⁵ But, while they were often resisted by the official opposition at first, most of these contested changes, including devolution and the minimum wage, are now in practice relatively entrenched. The Conservative Party accepts them, if only as *fait accompli*. For this reason, New Labour can be seen as having made a substantial and lasting difference to the



Figure 2. Professor Vernon Bogdanor FBA speaking in October 2009 at the British Academy Forum on ‘The New British Constitution’: *Democracy and Participation*. He also participated in the British Academy Forum on ‘A British Bill of Rights’ in March 2010. Photo: M. Crossick.

constitution – where it has probably brought about greater transformation than any other policy area in which it has operated. Constitutional reform may well turn out to be New Labour’s major historic achievement.

Significance

Professor Vernon Bogdanor FBA conveyed the importance of the changes that had occurred at a British Academy Forum in October 2009, where he stated that

what was once a historic constitution is now something different. By a ‘historic constitution’ I do not just mean a constitution that was very old, but one that was unplanned, one that was evolutionary and organic. The changes, most of which have occurred since 1997, have made of it a constitution that has been planned and is both codified and statutory.

We have, since 1997, been undergoing a process unique in the democratic world of transforming an uncodified constitution into a codified one ... The essence of this new constitution is a limitation on the powers of Parliament. The Human Rights Act and the devolution legislation have something of the character of fundamental law. They in practice limit the rights of Westminster as a sovereign parliament, and establish a constitution which is quasi-federal in nature.⁶

Acknowledgement of the significance of the New Labour constitutional programme has come from many sources, including those hostile to it. Sir John Baker described to the British Academy

the dismal reflection that we no longer have a constitution, in the sense of a set of conventions which set the bounds of executive power and keep the Government within those bounds, conventions which – though unwritten and flexible – can be

abandoned only by general consensus and after careful thought. The consensus of the last century or more has ended, and the Government has stormed into the void, constantly tinkering with constitutional arrangements as a routine exercise of power and without much regard to the consequences.⁷

Background

But some of the shifts that have occurred can be seen as taking up and perhaps augmenting ideas being implemented or at least considered by the Conservative governments before 1997 (such as Bank of England operational independence, which was contemplated, and the *Open Government* programme for more readily available official information).

Others can be seen as responses (whether wise or otherwise) to external developments, rather than arising from the particular interests of New Labour. Most obviously, growing concern about international terrorism after 11 September 2001 found expression in various modifications of legal processes – such as extensions to the maximum period of pre-charge detention for terrorist suspects – about which significant concerns have been expressed by organisations including Liberty. When speaking at the British Academy in January the Director of Liberty, Shami Chakrabarti, conveyed the idea that, rather than being an exclusively New Labour contribution, such measures were the product of an inter-party bidding-up process (although the Conservative Party has resisted some of Labour’s specific proposals). As she put it: ‘The greatest problem in our political culture is ... an arms race that has sometimes gone on between the main political parties as to who is to be toughest about terrorism.’⁸

Finally, there are areas where it is difficult to ascertain what would have been the approach of a Conservative government as opposed to a Conservative opposition. For instance, it could be argued that a broadly ambivalent approach towards the EU, and the pooling of sovereignty it entails, is likely under both Labour and the Conservatives, with variations only of emphasis and over particular issues.

Limitations

Aside from a consideration of the differences New Labour has and has not made, it is possible to assess how extensive were the changes it brought. Some key limitations can be identified:

- The stalling of the English regional agenda, meaning that devolution has not impacted directly upon those living in England outside London, who comprise the vast majority of the UK population.⁹
- The inability of courts formally to strike down primary legislation under the Human Rights Act, meaning that it did not fully amount to a Bill of Rights as conceived of in countries such as the United States. Sir John Baker has, however, argued that ‘The Act has ... begun to alter the judicial culture in Britain and may have paved the way for judicial review of legislation at some time in the future’.¹⁰
- The persistence of an un-elected House of Lords, though all three parties are now in theory committed to a wholly or partly elected second chamber.

- The retention during the New Labour term of office of the disproportionate first-past-the-post electoral system for determining the composition of the UK Parliament, despite the implementation in the UK during this period of more proportional systems for elections to all the newly-established devolved chambers, Scottish local authorities and the European Parliament. The system which Brown now supports, the Alternative Vote (AV), would not, if introduced, provide a remedy to dis-proportionality.
- Local government – often overlooked in constitutional discussions but of immense significance to people in their everyday lives – continuing to lack autonomy from the centre over finance and policy.¹¹

One outcome which it might be argued the New Labour programme has not delivered is that of a so-called ‘separation of powers’. Baker argues that ‘If we try to discern a guiding strategy from the Government’s statements, we might conclude that it was the Separation of Powers.’¹² But the relevance of this concept has been challenged, including by Dr Mogens Hansen FBA, who told the British Academy in February 2010: ‘the separation of powers is an outdated theory. The subdivision of functions into legislative, executive and judicial is still valid, but the doctrine of the separation of functions and of persons is so riddled with exceptions that it must be scrapped.’¹³ Providing supporting evidence for Hansen’s view, even as New Labour reduced the role of the executive in judicial appointments – arguably separating out two branches of state – Parliament began assuming a new function for conducting pre-appointment hearings for a range of public posts, including some associated with the judiciary, bringing it closer to the legislative branch.¹⁴

Professor Bogdanor made two points about the limits of the New Labour constitutional programme. First he argued that:

the new constitution has done little to secure more popular involvement in politics. It has redistributed power territorially and ‘sideways’ between members of the political and judicial

elite, rather than to the electorate. That is why the new constitution has made so little impact on popular opinion; nor has it served to counter political apathy, as manifested in low turnout and declining membership of political parties.¹⁵

The lack of participation to which Bogdanor referred was particularly problematic from a Labour perspective since, as demonstrated by successive editions of the annual *Audit of Political Engagement* produced by the Hansard Society, there is a clear correlation between social disadvantage and the absence of a propensity to take part in political processes.

Codification

A second lacuna in the Labour programme noted by Bogdanor was that the ‘process of transforming an uncoded constitution into a codified one’ was ‘piecemeal, there being neither the political will nor sufficient consensus to do more.’¹⁶ On the one hand, to an increasing extent, the UK constitution was being written down in publicly available documents. This process was already under way by 1997, with the publication under John Major of the 1992 edition of *Questions of Procedure for Ministers* (known since 1997 as the *Ministerial Code*) and the promulgation of the *Civil Service Code* in 1996. Legislation such as the *Human Rights Act*, *Freedom of Information Act* and the various devolution acts can be seen as altering both the *content* of the UK constitution, through the policies for which they provided statutory expression, and its *form*, in that they helped bring about a settlement that was more formally defined.

But on the other hand, if an ideal democratic codified constitution is understood as a single entrenched document, in possession of legitimacy drawn from some form of popular involvement, setting out the higher law of a society to which all institutions and individuals are subject, then such an entity has not been brought into being. There is no consensus about what precisely the UK constitution is; there are no special mechanisms to protect it from being altered too easily; it is grounded in no specific popular process; and though the practical reality might be different, the official position remains that ultimate authority lies with the UK Parliament, not a constitution.

There is evidence of growing support, in various different quarters, for the adoption of some of the features of a codified constitution as set out above. Baker believes that – ‘now that our unwritten constitution has been unravelled’ – it is time (regrettably, in his view) to grant judges a role in upholding the UK settlement.¹⁷ And, as has been discussed, Gordon Brown now advocates a ‘written constitution’. At a speech arranged by the Institute for Public Policy Research given on 2 February 2010, Brown outlined a process which may or may not continue, depending on the outcome of the forthcoming General



Figure 3. Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty (The National Council for Civil Liberties), at the British Academy Forum on 8 March 2010. She also took part in the British Academy panel discussion on ‘The Fate of Freedom’ in January 2010. Photo: M. Crossick.

Figure 4. During the 2001 General Election campaign, the constitutional reform pressure group, Charter 88, produced this enormous poster challenging Prime Minister Tony Blair's record on establishing 'a new relationship between government and people', 24 May 2001. Photo: Reuters/Stephen Hird.



Election. It would involve a proposed all-party group and wide public consultation that could lead to the introduction of a codified settlement on the 800th anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta, that is in 2015. On the surface, a radical agenda. But the contradictory tendencies that have frequently characterised the New Labour approach to the constitution became apparent once more when Brown described how he had instigated proceedings:

I can announce today that I have asked the Cabinet Secretary to lead the work to consolidate all the existing, unwritten, piecemeal conventions that govern much of the way central government operates, and to do so under our existing Constitution into a single written document. ... I think a good basis for starting might be ... to bring together what does exist

into one document and then to throw that out to the public and say, 'Look, this is where we are. Do you want a Constitution like, for example, the South African Constitution, where we set down all the basic rights of people and the objectives of our country?' and then we have to make a decision on the scope, therefore, of what that would be.¹⁸

Process

The initial project, then, was to be one along the lines advocated by Jack Straw, the Justice Secretary, to the House of Commons Justice Committee the previous July, when he supported a written constitution that was 'a text which seeks to bring together the fundamental principles, sometimes called conventions, of our

constitutional arrangements, the most important of which is that Parliament is sovereign', as opposed to 'an entrenched and overarching Constitution which is more powerful than Parliament.'¹⁹

A constitution based on the Straw model would fail to meet a number of the criteria for a democratic, codified settlement that I have set out above. It would not be entrenched and would leave the principle of parliamentary sovereignty intact. There would be legitimacy problems as well. It is being generated by a closed process. The first draft of the written constitution for the UK is currently being drawn up inside the Cabinet Office under the name of the 'Cabinet Office manual', apparently emulating an equivalent document which exists in New Zealand. It will comprise a statement of the various conventions and laws its authors believe comprise the UK settlement. (A glimpse was provided of work in progress when the draft of a chapter on 'Elections and Government formation'²⁰ was submitted to the Justice Committee in February.) The only outsiders initially involved are a select group of academics and other experts drawn upon informally as the Cabinet Office sees fit. While this process is intended only as a first stage to be followed by wider consultation, and the views of the Justice Committee were solicited on the 'Elections and Government formation' document, the importance of who produces the first draft of any constitution should not be underestimated. The Cabinet Office will be able – and be required – to exercise a significant amount of subjective judgement in various areas, given the uncertain nature of the settlement they are describing. Furthermore there is no guarantee that significant progress will be made beyond this step. The interim arrangement could become the permanent one.

Finally, even if the process is subsequently broadened, the way in which it has been instigated will mean that the onus of justification falls upon those who favour change to the constitution. There will be an in-built conservative tendency. The alternative approach would be to begin a discussion of the way in which a democracy should function by establishing a set of first principles, to be followed by the devising of a concrete settlement by which they can most effectively be realised. Such a process would be the best means of ensuring the establishment of a democratic constitution, untainted by the flavour of the Roman *constitutiones*.

Notes

- 1 Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A comparative study of total power* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 101.
- 2 Hansard, House of Commons (HC) Debates, 10 June 2009, Col. 798.
- 3 Sir John Baker FBA's Maccabaeian Lecture in Jurisprudence, on 'Our Unwritten Constitution', was delivered at the British Academy on 24 November 2009. An audio recording of the lecture can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/. The text will be published in *Proceedings of the British Academy*.
- 4 See: Andrew Blick and George Jones, *Premiership: the development, nature and power of the office of the British Prime Minister* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010).
- 5 The British Academy Forum on 8 March 2010, organised in association with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, discussed 'A British Bill of Rights'.
- 6 The British Academy Forum on 26 October 2009 discussed "'The New British Constitution": Democracy and Participation'. The lead discussants were Professor Vernon Bogdanor FBA, Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP, and Dr Tony Wright MP. In an advance briefing note, Professor Bogdanor summarised the argument of his recent book, *The New British Constitution* (2009: Hart Publishing). A transcript of the discussion (including the briefing note) can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/: the quotations here are from pp. 5 and 3.
- 7 Baker, 'Our Unwritten Constitution'.
- 8 The British Academy held a panel discussion on 'The Fate of Freedom', on 12 January 2010. The event was convened by Professor Susan Mendus FBA. Audio recordings of the discussion can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/
- 9 See: Andrew Blick, *Devolution and regional administration: A federal UK in embryo?* (London: Federal Trust, November 2009).
- 10 Baker, 'Our Unwritten Constitution', fn. 3.
- 11 See e.g.: House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, *The Balance of Power: Central and Local Government*, Sixth Report of 2008–09 (London: The Stationery Office, 12 May 2009), HC 33 – I.
- 12 Baker, 'Our Unwritten Constitution'.
- 13 On 25 February 2010, Dr Mogens Hansen delivered the annual British Academy Lecture, on 'The Mixed Constitution: Monarchical and Aristocratic Aspects of Modern Democracy'. An audio recording of the lecture can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/
- 14 See: *Pre-appointment hearings by select committees: guidance for departments* (London: Cabinet Office, August 2009).
- 15 "'The New British Constitution": Democracy and Participation', p. 3.
- 16 "'The New British Constitution": Democracy and Participation', p. 3.
- 17 Baker, 'Our Unwritten Constitution'.
- 18 Gordon Brown, 'Transforming politics', speech given at RSA, 2 February 2010.
- 19 House of Commons Justice Committee, Oral Evidence, 14 July 2009, Question 61.
- 20 'Elections and Government formation (DRAFT)' (London: Cabinet Office, February 2010).

Dr Andrew Blick is Senior Research Fellow, Democratic Audit. He is author, with Professor George Jones, of *Premiership: the development, nature and power of the office of the British Prime Minister*, published in April 2010 by Imprint Academic.

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Financial and Economic Horizon-scanning

MADAM,

On 22 July 2009, the British Academy wrote a letter to you following its forum held on 17 June 2009, which had been devoted to answering the question you had posed at the London School of Economics the previous November about why nobody had noticed that the credit crunch was on its way.¹ In that letter, we mentioned an intention to convene another British Academy forum on financial and economic horizon-scanning capabilities, to examine what your Crown servants could do 'so that you never need to ask your question at LSE again'. Your Private Secretary kindly wrote back to us on 30 July, indicating your interest in our project. A second forum was held on 15 December 2009, and this letter is an account of the flow of thought and debate.

Horizon-scanning is distinct from forecasting. As we have seen in recent events, the challenge is about understanding discontinuities, and forecasts cannot cope with that. Creating scenarios has a role to play in emphasising that there are genuine uncertainties which cannot be quantified. But, for this to be effective, it is absolutely essential to ask the right questions and to have sufficient imagination. Effective horizon-scanning has both cultural and institutional components. There is a need to develop a culture of questioning in which no assumption is accepted without scepticism and a sufficiently broad

In December 2009 a British Academy Forum considered what steps might be taken by government agencies to anticipate and prepare for any future shocks to the financial system and the global economy. The two convenors of the Forum, Professor Tim Besley FBA and Professor Peter Hennessy FBA, summarised the discussion in a letter sent to Her Majesty The Queen on 8 February 2010.

array of outcomes is considered. But that comes to nothing unless the process is institutionalised within a body that pulls together these ideas and is responsible for drawing general lessons and concerns.

It is evident from our answer to your earlier enquiry that the UK had not been well-served by warning signs on the road to events of 2008. For example, the Standing Committee staffed jointly by the Treasury, the Bank of England and the Financial Services Authority (FSA), whose purpose, as one of our participants put it, was 'to spot risk coming down the track and act upon it', failed to do so. The FSA, we were told, 'spent much of the decade looking at the conduct of business issues. The Bank of England was very focused on monetary policy and indeed pared back its financial stability wing ... [and] ... the Treasury, which was ultimately responsible for bringing all this together, and therefore should have been able to spot the risks, failed to do so as well.'

Besides the Treasury, the Bank of England and the FSA, other organs of government were voicing their concerns about unfolding events. In their major analysis of *Strategic Trends* published in 2003, the staff of

Figure 1. Professor Tim Besley FBA and Professor Peter Hennessy FBA, the two signatories of the letter sent to The Queen on 8 February 2010. Photo: David Graeme-Baker.



the Ministry of Defence's Joint Doctrine & Concepts Centre at Shrivenham (since re-labelled as the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre) warned: 'The relative risks of economic shocks having major detrimental impacts on states is likely to increase. This is one of the potential perils of globalisation. Difficulties in one part of the global system will have a wider impact due to deepening integration



Figure 2. At the British Academy Forum in December 2009, Sir Nicholas Macpherson, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, contributed a frank 'on the record' critique of some of the lessons learned by Britain's financial authorities during the current crisis. Photo: David Graeme-Baker.

but equally the room for error in domestic policy decisions will reduce due to more mobile capital and more transparent information on national policy and performance. The impacts of such crises are likely to be increasingly severe in terms of national prosperity and potentially more likely to precipitate knock-on consequences for other closely dependent states.' And in a 2006 paper 'Financial Fragility Exposed by a Sudden Interest Rate Shock', the Horizon-Scanning Centre of the Government Office for Science (now part of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) examined the dangers of 'the explosive growth of the global capital market on the back of securitisation and derivatives which has meant that regulators have found it hard to keep up with the multitude of new instruments and the attendant risks involved.' But, as we emphasised in our earlier letter, it is not enough to see the problem. It is essential to understand the timing and magnitude of likely consequences and to have a proper response to these difficulties prepared. And without an institution to draw together intelligence across relevant institutions, there was little scope for a complete picture to be formed.

To be fair to the Treasury/FSA/Bank of England Standing Committee, they did mount a dry-run in 2005 of what would happen if a bank failed, although the legislation needed to improve the existing bank-failure regime was not regarded as a priority and did not materialise. Since the onset of the crisis, the Standing Committee has concentrated powerfully on horizon-scanning. However, the unprecedented nature of the events has made it very difficult to do so with any precise analysis of the likely prognosis for the economy. The Treasury too has reviewed its capabilities and its managing director on the international side now chairs a group which brings together all of its risk-management/horizon-scanning elements. The Treasury also has taken steps to increase in-house challenge to existing assumptions and analyses.

The British Academy forum reflected a consensus on the need for improvement. However, when it comes to the economy one has to be realistic about what can be achieved. Economies are inevitably unstable and it is a dangerous conceit to believe that economic cycles can be eliminated. However, it is essential for the organs of government to be readied and armed with the best intelligence.

Those who emphasised cultural change argued that the best chance of avoiding the need to repeat your LSE question lies in quickening the sensitivities and states of mind of those charged with trying to anticipate what economic and financial shocks may occur in future. This can only happen where there is an environment which provides sufficient criticism of assumptions and is open to considering a wide range of possibilities. The hierarchical structures and histories of our many organisations provide a major challenge to making this work effectively. It was even suggested that there should be a rule that allows nobody to work in a particular position of responsibility for more than eight years.

Others thought the lessons of the past – not least the difficulty the Cabinet Office's Joint Intelligence Committee has had over several decades with the acquisition, handling and dissemination of economic information – suggested that a more bespoke institutional arrangement might help in future; perhaps a Unit or Group charged with pulling together all the relevant information from the existing wider institutional churn. Some saw merit in a combination of cultural and institutional reform.

All recognised the difficulty of scenario building in this area and the particular sensitivity of financial information. This has long bedevilled the wider dissemination of the most delicate economic information, for fear of both leaks and the consequences of such leaks (precipitating precisely those events the horizon-scanners and policy-makers most feared, in terms of runs on the currency or institutional failure). It is for this reason that the Bank of England's monthly *World Risk Briefing* does not pass beyond its formidable walls. The age of freedom of information adds still more peril. Nonetheless, your senior Crown servants at the forum professed a willingness to try.

To be candid, Your Majesty, your Ministerial servants were seen by some as an extra cause of anxiety. It was often very hard to persuade them to become properly involved in horizon-scanning. Some found it too gloomy; others saw the contingencies covered to be too remote. Sometimes involving Ministers in exercises related to horizon-scanning and the resultant contingency planning helped, but not all were keen to devote time to these. Attracting and retaining the attention of busy senior policy advisers and decision-takers remains a perennial problem.

There was a general reluctance at the forum to endorse a proposal to produce a regular horizon-scanning summary, drawing on all providers for the purpose of making maximum use of the information and the thought swirling around in the various parts of your Crown services. Nobody volunteered either individually or institutionally to lead this task and there was scepticism about the ability to institutionalise such activity within government within current structures.

In the end, the major challenge is to make institutions and organisational cultures work together. This means also getting the right people involved who see the task as a central part of their role in government. One can have as much scenario planning as one likes, but if there is no buy in from the people who will be taking the decisions in a crisis, then it is probably counterproductive. As you can see, there are no simple answers.

So, we end with a modest proposal. If you, Your Majesty, were to ask for a monthly economic and financial horizon-scanning summary from, say, the Cabinet Office, it could hardly be refused. It might take a form comparable to the Joint Intelligence Committee's 'Red Book', which you received each week from 1952 until 2008 when it was abandoned. And, if this were to happen, the spirit of your LSE question would suffuse still more those of your Crown servants tasked to defend, preserve and enhance the economic well-being of your country.

We have the honour to remain, Madam,

Your Majesty's most humble and obedient servants

Professor Tim Besley, FBA

Professor Peter Hennessy, FBA



Figure 3. This cartoon by Kipper Williams from the 'Guardian' website represents an extreme interpretation of the proposal that The Queen should ask for a monthly economic and financial horizon-scanning summary, as a way of concentrating the minds of government officials. Image: guardian.co.uk, 10 February 2010.

British Academy Forum on 'Financial and economic horizon-scanning: developing an early warning capacity'

Full list of participants:

Alex Allan (Joint Intelligence Committee)

Professor Tim Besley FBA (London School of Economics)

Professor Richard Brealey FBA (London Business School)

Gareth Davies (Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office)

Dr Jon Davis (Queen Mary, University of London)

Alun Evans (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills)

Sir John Gieve (formerly of the Bank of England)

Ian Ginsberg (HM Treasury)

Dr Simon Griffiths (British Academy)

Dr Catherine Haddon (Institute for Government)

Professor Peter Hennessy FBA (Queen Mary, University of London)

Rosaleen Hughes (Queen Mary, University of London)

Dr Gregor Irwin (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)

Sir Nicholas Macpherson (HM Treasury)

Paul Mayo (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills)

Dr Lynette Nusbacher (Strategic Horizons Unit, Cabinet Office)

Professor George Peden (University of Stirling)

Jonathan Portes (Cabinet Office)

Peter Riddell (*The Times*; Institute for Government)

Sir Adam Roberts (President of the British Academy)

Lord Turnbull (former Secretary of the Cabinet)

Dr Harry Woodroof (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills)

Note

1 The text of the July 2009 letter to The Queen was published in the *British Academy Review*, issue 14 (November 2009).

THE FISCAL CHALLENGE

The state of the public finances, which have deteriorated markedly since the onset of the recession, is a major Election issue. It provoked an exchange of letters in the 'Sunday Times' and the 'Financial Times', leading to media focus on the pace of tightening in the near term. Fellows of the British Academy were signatories on both sides of the debate. The British Academy Forum on 'The Fiscal Challenge', held on 4 March 2010, brought together participants in this debate, as well as other experts, to discuss the nature of the challenge and the response to it. The chairman, Professor Tim Besley FBA, summarises the discussion.

The discussion was opened by Robert Chote, Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, who summarised the facts and the core questions. He noted that the government has planned a two-year fiscal stimulus followed by eight years of tightening, with an intent to eliminate the structural deficit by 2017/18. In spite of much of the rhetoric, the year of the greatest tightening is planned to be 2010/11. Current plans will see spending on public services returning to around 21% of GDP – a similar number to the early 2000s. This will be achieved by having a roughly flat profile of public spending. But with debt interest payments scheduled to rise at around 9% per year, this will mean that department spending will have to decline by around 3% per year.

Choices

However, the exact use of spending and tax measures will depend upon future political choices, and there is considerable uncertainty around the outlook for the economy with risks in both directions. There are three major uncertainties which policies need to confront. We do not know how large the final deficit will be, and the strength and resilience of the economic recovery is also uncertain. And we cannot be sure how participants in financial markets will respond to the policy choices and other factors. When one listens to the public debate, it is unrealistic to expect much movement on policy before an Election. But it is important that authorities confront the uncertainties that cloud these decisions; they should not hide behind them as an excuse not to give spending projections or predictions about how the economy will develop.

Four main themes emerged in the discussion.

Fiscal tightening

First, there was discussion of whether the pace of planned tightening is sufficient. One view was that markets will need appropriate reassurance that the government is serious about implementing the kind of tough action needed, with earlier action being needed to signal intent and to build confidence. Others argued that too much attention is being paid to market sentiment in a world where the financial market's own credibility has recently suffered a major shock. There was also a question of whether the markets are themselves sufficiently Keynesian in their perspective and recognise the need for continued government stimulus to protect the economy. But some participants took issue with this, arguing that the real issue is with the credibility of politicians rather than differences of view about the economy. More generally, there is a question of how far we can expect the deficit to close as the economy recovers, and whether the Treasury is being too pessimistic about the recovery. Some argued that there is now an excessively pessimistic view of the potential for economic recovery.

Fiscal policy and monetary policy

It was emphasised that the interplay of fiscal policy and monetary policy matters. Since the Bank of England was given its independence in 1997, these have run independently. But the current crisis has reminded us that there can be benefits of co-ordination. Fiscal policy is not the only game in town when it comes to providing support for the economy, and monetary policy will still be available when fiscal tightening begins.

Level of debt

It was widely agreed that the level of debt to GDP is not the issue right now, and that the historical record would not suggest that the UK is particularly highly indebted compared to the past. But at what point this might change did provoke some debate. One issue concerned whether a future government might prefer to deal with the problem by encouraging a bout of inflation. This could happen before any debt limit is reached, and was on the minds of financial market participants. Some contributors emphasised the need to get away from thinking of the issues narrowly in terms of the fiscal deficit. There are broader concerns about the nation's finances and the interplay between public and private sector saving/indebtedness.

Public investment

There was discussion of the need to avoid public spending cuts that fall excessively on productive investment, which often gets cut hardest and fastest when public spending is squeezed. And this comes on the back of many years of under-investment in infrastructure in the UK. It was stressed that this investment is what generates the productive capacity which will enable the UK to increase its tax base in the long term.

Institutional change

A second theme concerned the need for institutional change. Many macroeconomists are pleased that, over the last 15 years, we have roughly sorted out how to do monetary policy. This was achieved with an appropriate institutional change in which the Bank of England gained its independence. It was argued by some participants that it is important that political influence be more limited in the conduct of fiscal policy, particularly in relation to fiscal forecasts. If that does not happen, managing the current situation will be even more difficult. Just how far an independent fiscal body could improve the situation was debated. It was acknowledged that it could not have averted the current problems entirely, given the scale of the shock that the economy has experienced. But it might have prevented the UK from beginning the crisis in such a weak fiscal position, already running a structural deficit.

Politics

A third theme concerned the political economy of austerity. How would any government manage the cuts, and would they be able to protect the vulnerable? It was necessary to think through how this will be managed politically by the next government, and given the normal circumstances of adversarial party politics, this will be extremely challenging. Creating an office of fiscal responsibility, whatever the merits of that might be, does not address the problem of how to gain support for such a far-reaching package of cuts – not just in one year but sustained over such a long period. It is incredibly difficult for politicians to realise that a large part of the hole is created by failing to put enough money into paying for the pre-crisis structural deficit, and failing to explain to people that we will somehow have to pay for the costs of demographic change. However, this must be faced at some point in the future.

The British electorate has been singularly unprepared to pay for its social welfare ambitions in the last decade. The proportion of GDP going on these objectives has been rising, whereas the tax take has not. From 1997–2000, there was a pause in upward social spending which then resumed at an even faster pace. It is impossible to go on doing that. The current problem is overlaid by this structural-political problem, which is further compounded by the demography. Thus, with the projected rise in age-related public spending, it will become more and more difficult to sustain the kinds of commitments that have been made in the past. In the end, there will have to be a rethink of what the state can promise and deliver in a sustainable way over the medium term. There was discussion of how far a hung parliament after this year's Election would affect this. History suggests that we have a device that has been used once or twice, even in peacetime, which is a National Government. If you could get sufficient agreement, a National Government could set out a four- or five-year programme on which everyone was agreed. And perhaps the time has no come for this to be considered given the scale of the challenge.

Financial sector

A fourth theme went more to the origins of the crisis and the power of finance in the world. The power of financial capital, represented by Wall Street and the City of London, is exemplified in its ability to force the taxpayer to bail it out. Some participants saw this as the fundamental problem. Rather than worrying about how to get the poor and middle classes to pay for these crises, it is a question of how to curb the power of finance. We are witnessing one financial crisis after another, and they are getting worse. Whether and how taxation could be raised on the financial sector is part of an important on-going debate at the international level. The crisis raised structural issues of how we want to run our economies, and how far economic power had been ceded to international financial markets.

But it was also noted that a large part of the fiscal problem that we are now facing has come about not because we were failing to collect tax from the financial sector or because of the money we have spent on bailing it out, expensive thought that is. It is more because we were collecting tax from the financial sector and that sector was inflating credit in a way which everyone said was a good thing. That technique

was generating capital gains, most notably on land. The financial sector set up institutions which essentially collected commissions by allowing people to realise those capital gains. We collected tax on those commissions, which were underpinned by capital gains, and we called that current income. This was part of the reason why we ended up with a structural deficit in the boom years.

Full list of participants:

Professor Tim Besley FBA (London School of Economics)
 Roger Bootle (Capital Economics Ltd)
 Robert Chote (Institute of Fiscal Studies)
 Bronwyn Curtis (Head of HSBC Global Research)
 Gareth Davies (Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office)
 Tony Dolphin (IPPR)
 Professor Andrew Gamble FBA (University of Cambridge)
 Chris Giles (*Financial Times*)
 Professor Howard Glennerster FBA (London School of Economics)
 Professor Charles Goodhart FBA (London School of Economics)
 Professor John Hills FBA (London School of Economics)
 Professor Stephen Machin FBA (University College London)
 Professor Iain McLean FBA (University of Oxford)
 Dan Mawson (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills)
 Professor Marcus Miller (University of Warwick)
 Mel Porter (History & Policy)
 Jonathan Portes (Cabinet Office)
 Sir Adam Roberts (President of the British Academy)
 Bridget Rosewell (Volterra Consulting)
 Lord Skidelsky FBA (University of Warwick)
 Lord Turnbull (former Cabinet Secretary)
 Professor David Vines (University of Oxford)
 Martin Weale (National Institute of Economic and Social Research)

British Academy Forums offer a neutral setting for argument based on research and evidence, to help frame the terms of public debates and clarify policy options.

British Academy Forums provide opportunities for frank, informed debate. It should not be assumed that any summary record of a Forum discussion reflects the views of every participant.

Family Policies and Social Science

On 23 February 2010, the British Academy Policy Centre launched its first report, 'Social Science and Family Policies'. At the launch, there was a lively debate, chaired by Polly Toynbee of the 'Guardian', on the respective roles of politicians and social scientists. Dr Simon Griffiths and Lili Hoag offer a flavour.

Professor Sir Michael Rutter FBA, who had chaired the report's working group, argued that good social science is needed by policy-makers for a variety of reasons:

- to check the validity of observations to see if they are representative
- to reveal the ways in which different individuals respond to similar causes
- to indicate which associations are likely to reflect causation
- to reject the fallacy that it is possible to find a single cause for complex situations or conditions
- to measure whether policies are getting to grips with problems that have been identified

The report itself set out a variety of examples of what the research into families showed policy-makers, and made a case for social scientists and politicians to work together better on their distinct, but equally important, roles in order to create better policies for families and young people.

Putting the debate into a wider public policy perspective, Sharon Witherspoon, Deputy Director of the Nuffield Foundation, reflected on her position as someone who both commissions and 'uses' research. She showed up the dangers of bad research, citing a survey from a leading divorce firm last year. The survey claimed that just over two-thirds (68%) admitted indiscriminately using their children as 'bargaining tools' when they separated. Further, 'a staggering 20% admitted that they had actively set out to make their partner's experience "as unpleasant as possible" regardless of the effect this had on their children's feelings.' This kind of claim tells us more about the



Figure 1. Michael Rutter, who chaired the report's Working Group. Photo: David Graeme-Baker.

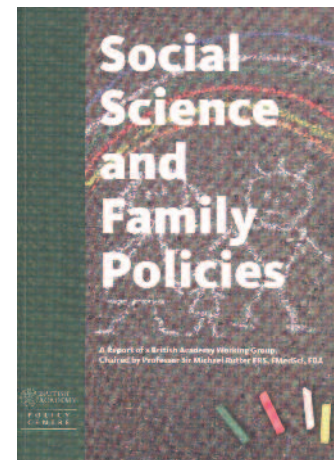
survey than society, and reflects deep biases. Bias, she noted, can be caused by the choice of a bad sample, self-selection into a study, or many other factors. In this case, the results did not provide descriptive accuracy. In the sample cited, half of respondents had been to court, whereas the true figure of separating couples who go to court is between 5 and 10%. Perhaps a fairer conclusion from this survey would have been to say something about the unhappiness of families who do go to court, compared to the 90–95% who muddle through without following that route.

Later in the discussion, Jill Kirby, Director of the Centre for Policy Studies, reflected on the family as a contemporary party political issue. She pointed out that family policy has become 'second only to the economy' for David Cameron and the Conservatives. She also raised the difficulty of separating values from social science.

This discussion garnered questions from academics, civil servants, and people working in the third sector as to what the interface between social science and policy currently is and what it should be. In particular, there was a focus on the tensions between those who argue for a 'parent-centred' or a 'child-centred approach', based on changing ideas as to what is best for children in the long term. This binary opposition was criticised by Jill Kirby, who argued for a more holistic approach. She argued that the Government has focused too much on early childhood

intervention, for instance in initiatives such as Sure Start, without taking into account family structure as a fundamental launching point for a good childhood and a positive future. What ensued was a lively debate on the issues around social science and family policy, to which this report makes an important contribution.

Dr Simon Griffiths is Senior Policy Adviser in the British Academy Policy Centre. Lili Hoag was a researcher on the *Social Science and Family Policies* report. The Policy Centre oversees a programme of activities, including reports and events, which aim to engage expertise within the humanities and social sciences to shed light on wider public policy issues. It was launched in October 2009, with support from the Economic and Social Research Council.



Social Science and Family Policies: Report of a British Academy Working Group, chaired by Professor Sir Michael Rutter, was published in February 2010. Sir Michael is Professor of Developmental Psychopathology, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London; he is an Honorary Fellow of the British Academy.

A copy of the report, together with more information about the British Academy Policy Centre, can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/policy/

The Evolutionary Anthropology of the Family

Professor Ruth Mace FBA argues that evolutionary influences on human family patterns cannot be ignored.

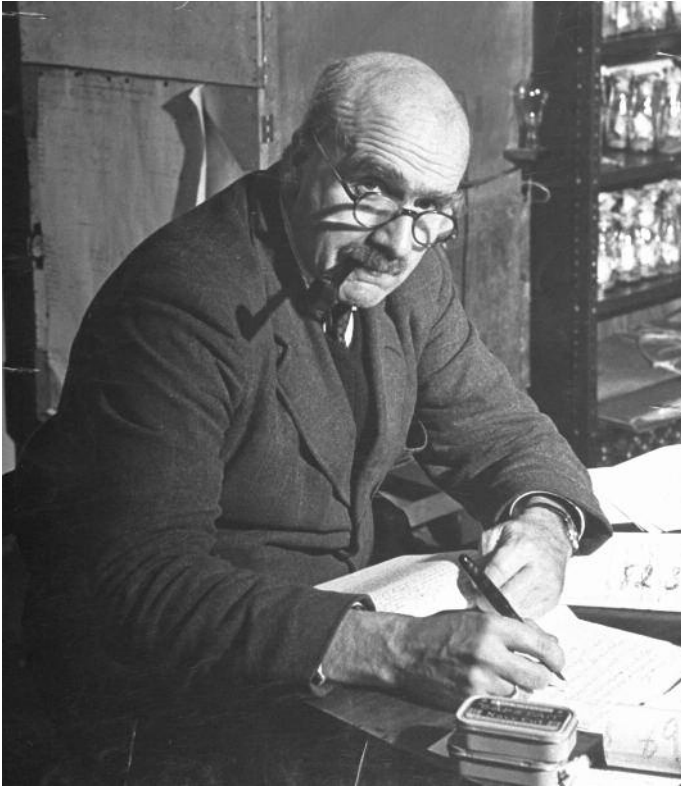


Figure 1. Professor J.B.S. Haldane.
Photo: Hans Wild/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.

exacted by children are more than can easily be met by one parent, or even two. There is an increasing realisation that the extended family has been an important part of human child-rearing throughout our evolutionary history. Several studies have now shown that grandmothers improve the survival chances of children in high-mortality environments, as is evident from studies examining historical European demographic records or more contemporary data from high-mortality populations in Africa. This effect may have been so important in our evolutionary history that it explains the evolution of menopause – we give up reproducing our own offspring to help our adult daughters reproduce. Our life history differs markedly from that of other primates, due to a long childhood, and a long post-reproductive life, with a period of rapid reproduction in between. The explanation may be that three generations have co-operated as the unit of human reproduction throughout human evolution. Our long childhood ends at about the time our mother reaches menopause, and as we reach menopause, our mother dies. The three generations do not reproduce at the same time, thus avoiding competing with each other over resources for offspring; in fact they appear to help each other like communal breeders. This kind of life history could only evolve in a species with long life expectancy, and a complicated subsistence system that requires skills that children take time to learn. Our life history and our social structures have all been shaped by the need to recruit help from kin in the successful raising of these expensive offspring.

Stepchildren

A Darwinian perspective on families not only gives us insights into love, care and co-operation, but also into conflict and violence. When two Canadian biologists (Martin Daly and the recently deceased Margo Wilson) examined homicide prosecution records, they found that young children were 40 times more likely to be murdered by their mother's partner if he was unrelated to the child versus if he was the child's father. The study was met with nothing short of hostility. Twenty years since it was published, this study is still being dismissed by many as relating to the extreme behaviour of psychopathic individuals, which does not tell us much about normal people.¹ But this ignores the fact that this finding has now been replicated in many countries. Only in Sweden, with a long history of abortion on demand and very active social services, is child murder so rare that the effect is no longer observed.

Most police forces in the UK are well aware of the 'step parent risk' effect, and in criminal cases of children coming to harm, if an unrelated parent figure is present, they are likely to be the first suspect in the investigation. In cases where fathers live with genetic and non-genetic offspring, an increased likelihood of discrimination and

J.B.S. HALDANE WAS FAMOUS not only for his academic contributions to evolutionary biology and other fields, but for his witty quotations. Once, when asked if he would lay down his life for his brother, he responded, 'No, but I would for two brothers or eight cousins.' Here he was pre-empting his fellow evolutionary biologist William Hamilton's 'rule' for kin selection. This is a rule that essentially predicts that evolution has designed us to help others as a function of our relatedness to that person, multiplied by the relative benefit of the help we give them to the cost to ourselves. The currency of this unsentimental calculation is our ability to produce offspring that carry the same genes that we do. This selfish gene's eye view of human relationships may seem reductionist, but ignoring it would mean we miss one of the most powerful predictive forces about human social behaviour in general, and family life in particular.

Child-rearing

Children are very costly, in terms of the time and resources they demand, but natural selection has ensured we are willing to pay that price; indeed it is the central purpose of life to do just that. We are not surprised that parents will sometimes do almost anything for their children. We forgive our children their transgressions, and generally continue to support even the most unrewarding and unhelpful teenager into young adulthood if they are our offspring. But the costs

violence against the unrelated child can again be clearly detected in various data sources; mothers sometimes collude by choosing to ignore what new partners are doing to their child, 'disinvesting' in the offspring of a previous relationship in favour of the new partnership. Given the dismal roll call of child victims harmed by the hands of people they live with, which hit our news media so regularly, one wonders to what extent social services are aware of these findings.

Whilst child abuse might be considered unnatural and extreme, studies of non-physical conflict (such as arguments) do show the same pattern, with conflict reduced between genetic versus non-genetic father-figures. It is unusual in modern society that children live with stepmothers, but folklore tells us that the 'Cinderella effect' probably applies to women as much as men. Even in a study of accidental deaths in Australia (ranging from traffic accidents to falling into swimming pools, when no foul play is suspected), genetic parents, be they one single parent or two married parents, were less likely to lose their child to such an accident than if young children were living with one genetic parent and one non-genetic parent. Even height of children tells a similar tale. In our own study, using child height from over 14,000 children in the UK, we find children living with a single parent are slightly shorter than children living with two genetic parents; but children living with their mother plus an unrelated father figure were several millimetres shorter by the age of 10.² Height is an indicator of child health and stress during development. As with all the studies

listed above, these findings are statistical analyses rather than descriptions applicable in every case, but this result is most easily explained by an increased chance of elevated stress in a stepchild's life over years. The effect is more pronounced for sons than daughters. Perhaps parents know that boys are particularly badly affected by their father leaving, explaining a small but statistically significant effect of parents of sons being less likely to divorce than parents of daughters.

Life history theory tells us that reproductive life is about trade-offs, and a central trade-off throughout adulthood is how much time and energy to devote to mating effort (finding and keeping a mate or mates) and parenting effort (raising children). Parenting effort is hard work and not normally done for unrelated children unless for some explicit reward (one exception being in the case of formal adoption of young children in which a psychological state of parenthood can usually be achieved and these trends are then not observed). When parents form new relationships, they may be investing more time in their new partner than caring for their existing children (hence the heightened accident risk). On the positive side, clearly you are not likely to endear yourself to your new partner if you are hostile to his or her children, so kindness to and acceptance of new family members unrelated to you

Figure 2. *The birth of a new child, as depicted by Cecile Walton (1891-1956). 'Romance': self portrait with the artist's two sons, Edward and Gavril, 1920 (oil on canvas). Image: Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh/ The Bridgeman Art Library.*



but related to your new partner can be attributed to mating effort, causing many step families to settle down into stable loving households.

Lack of parental investment

This level of explanation does not assume decisions are necessarily conscious, nor does it address the proximate developmental, hormonal and emotional mechanisms that drive such behaviours; this approach simply addresses the kinds of patterns we would predict and do indeed find. If one accepts this admittedly rather unromantic account of the explanation of our child-rearing behaviour, then further puzzles present themselves. Why do parents sometimes not invest in their own offspring? The difficulties experienced by the Child Support Agency in extracting child support from absent fathers are testament to the ability of genetic parents to stop investing in offspring from failed relationships. This is understood through the mating/parenting trade-off I have already discussed. But why do parents commit infanticide, or give children away for adoption, or simply have so few children if they are what we are evolved to produce?

The trade-off invoked by life history theorists to explain these patterns are often referred to as the quantity/quality trade-off. Children do not contribute to parental reproductive success if they cannot survive, and cannot compete for resources to gain mates and raise their own children. Therefore it is not adaptive to have so many children that the children are compromised in their life chances by being short of resources. Sometimes children may be short-changed to enhance the success of their siblings. Historical accounts of Victorian children sent to work down the mines in darkness and penury while one child in the family is sent to school may be an extreme case. Primogeniture in inheritance of land and farms is another case in point. Ensuring that a few children have good prospects of success in the future could be a better parental strategy than having many children suffering from hunger or inability to find means of subsistence or marriage, unable to raise successful families of their own. A child born in extremely unfavourable circumstances may be abandoned by desperate parents if they feel the chances for future or previous births may be compromised by them. Historical demographic records from 17th-century Germany show us that young widows with children were far less likely to remarry and create new families than young widows who were childless – and that the babies of such young widows were subject to unusually high mortality rates. Parental care is not necessarily given unconditionally.

The cues we use to decide what is or isn't an adequate level of investment in a child are not fully understood, but parental investment is a scarce resource for which siblings compete. The suspicion with which a child views a new arrival in the family may reflect the different costs and benefits associated with siblings compared to offspring. What is clear is that siblings are both allies and competitors, with accounts of love and rivalry appearing in equal measure in literature, drama and real life. Big families are associated with higher

child mortality in the developing world, but even in wealthy societies there is evidence of competition between siblings for parental resources, not least the time we spend with each child. We strive to give children the best opportunities in life, and some will argue this process is running out of control. Perhaps irrationally we try to enable our children to achieve high exam results, to give them the best chance, and several studies have shown that with each additional child in the family, the average IQ or exam grades are slightly reduced. Are we responding to these cues when we limit our modern families to such a small size?

Cultural norms

Kin selection not only predicts patterns of individual behaviour but also our legal practices and cultural norms. We are so aware of nepotism that we are vigilant for its biasing effects in the hiring practices of firms and public bodies. If you wish to donate a kidney to someone who is not related to you, it will be viewed with suspicion by the health service as potentially a financially motivated transaction unless you can make a strong case to the contrary. If you die intestate, the law determines that an estranged relative, who may never have done anything for you, perhaps never even met you, may inherit all your wealth if they are your closest surviving genetic relative. If you father a child, in the UK at least, you are liable to contribute financially to the upbringing of that child even if you do not live with that child or indeed have never had any contact with them. We may be unaware of the evolutionary basis of these norms, but the fingerprints of kin selection are all over our social lives and social institutions. It is perhaps unconscious familiarity that has bred contempt and obscured the importance of an evolutionary perspective to so many social scientists.

Notes

- 1 For example, hear BBC Radio 4, 'Aping Evolution', November 2009 (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00nk0wz).
- 2 D.W. Lawson & R. Mace, 'Sibling configuration and childhood growth in contemporary British families', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 37 (2008), 1408–1421. D.W. Lawson & R. Mace, 'Trade-offs in modern parenting: a longitudinal study of sibling competition for parental care', *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 30 (2009), 170–183.

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She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2008.

This article is based on a paper given by Professor Mace at the June 2009 Darwin Conference, jointly organised by the British Academy, the Royal Society and the American Philosophical Society.

RISKY AND RESOURCEFUL:

Parenting experiences of (ex) offender fathers

Dr Liz Walker received a British Academy Small Research Grant to study the experiences of fathers who had spent time in prison. Here she reveals that it is a complex picture.

SOCIAL INCLUSION and support are central tenets of government family policy, and fatherhood is widely regarded as crucial to family well-being and positive childhood outcomes. Recent social policy such as *Every Parent Matters* (2007) and legislation including the *Childcare Act* (2006) promote the involvement of fathers in the family. Yet, within the contexts of child welfare, probation services and the criminal justice system more generally, fathers are often viewed as highly risky and/or irrelevant, and thus disregarded. Popular representations of (some) men as irresponsible, reckless or negligent lie at the heart of the deficit model of fatherhood, and it is this model that often informs the assumptions and approaches of professionals within a range of practice settings. This 'deficit approach' is particularly acute in the context of vulnerable and marginal families, where the expectation is that men really do not parent effectively.

Photo: Fulvio/DOF-PHOTO.



The British Academy provided funding for the research outlined here.¹ The study sought to understand how a group of (ex) offender fathers reflected on their practices, perceptions and aspirations as fathers. While fatherhood in general has been the subject of extensive scholarship over the past two decades, offender fathers (and other groups of 'marginal men') have received scant attention in the research literature, although the ever increasing numbers of men and women serving custodial sentences in this country mean that prison experiences are reshaping and defining family life. For example, in May 2009, the prison population in the UK was 82,965, 95% of whom were men. Exact numbers of fathers in prison are not available, but estimates suggest that approximately 60% of men in prison have dependent children under 18. This research also contributes to the wider debates on fathering and family through an exploration of fathering in a context of significant adversity and vulnerability.

Interviews

The research was conducted in the North East of England during 2007/08 using a qualitative research design, drawing on qualitative research methods, specifically narrative interviews. The final sample of 16 fathers was accessed through National Probation Services (NPS) in the region, who gave permission for the study to proceed. Probation officers identified respondents for the sample from their case load. The sentences of the men included in the final sample ranged from 4 months to 14 years, with half (8) having served sentences of 2–3 years. All but one of the men were white and their ages ranged from 20 to 49, with most (13) between the ages of 25 and 39. Six served sentences for violent crimes including murder, manslaughter and rape, 6 had been in custody for drug related offences, 3 for robbery, and 1 for driving offences. All but 3 of the men were repeat offenders, and all interviewees were on licence at the time of interview.

Individual circumstances

This study highlights the very complex social and economic context (both past and present) in which these men parent. Seven of the 16 men have step-parents, 8 described their own dads as 'absent' and said they were 'brought up exclusively by their mothers', and 3 had themselves been in the care system as children. Eleven fathers had between 2 and 4 children, and 1 had more than 5. Eight were fathers to stepchildren and children of partners with whom they lived. The majority of the men were involved in negotiating and managing multiple relationships, family and contact/custody arrangements for their children. For example, one man found it very challenging to be a father to his three children, as they had different mothers who were all now in different relationships. Some of the men interviewed also had family

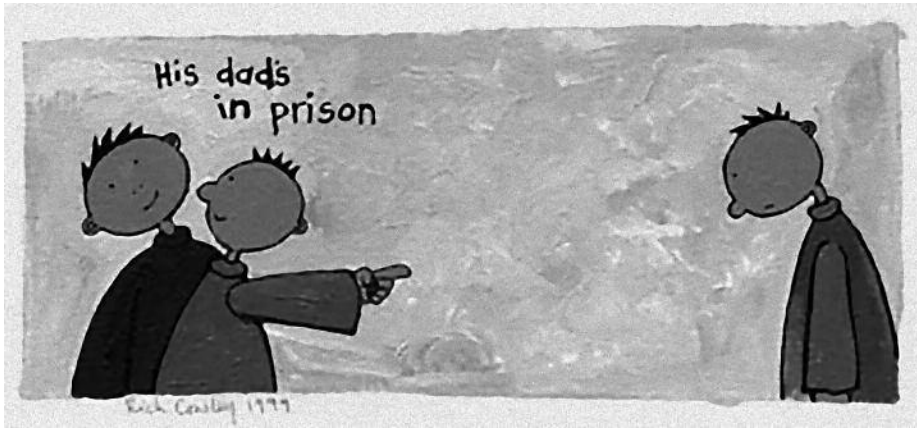


Image: Action for Prisoners' Families (www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk).

members in prison: one interviewee's father and brother were both serving custodial sentences, while another had a child in prison (for the same offence as his) and one awaiting trial. Others had siblings who have also served custodial sentences.

Seven interviewees identified that they had struggled with drug and alcohol dependency, and 3 had diagnosed mental health problems. All but one of the interviewees identified severe difficulties in meeting the costs of maintaining their homes and providing for their children – factors that are all-important indicators of family vulnerability. The terrain in which they were fathering was unpredictable, inconsistent and, for the overwhelming majority, economically impoverished. The base from which these men were attempting to parent was very fragile.

The 'collateral impact' of imprisonment, in particular the social, emotional and economic costs to families of offenders, is well known. Their intricate family networks, however, also provided invaluable support – these complex networks facilitated their fathering. Their partners, mothers, siblings, other family members and friends variously enabled and negotiated their relationships with their children, both in prison and post-release. It was often their families (in particular their mothers) that took on the role of parent which the (ex) offender was unable or at times, unwilling to do.²

Disruption

The research shows that the lives of many of the men interviewed are characterised by continual disruption and change. They

are constantly forming and reforming relationships with their children, partners, parents and friends. This is an obvious consequence of a prison sentence, compounded by repeat offending. They describe this as 'continually picking up the pieces of their lives'. Fatherhood therefore is intermittent, as are their relationships with their partners and parents. Describing the effect of re-imprisonment on his relationship with his son, one man said,

We lost touch when I went to prison. I started fighting through the courts to be able to see him. I fought for phone contact once every two weeks and then writing. Speaking on the phone was not the same as being there all the time. After I started to see him again I was recalled. There was a double impact because I just started to re-build something with him and then I went back in for 7 months. [It was] too painful to continue... we were so close before but not so much now. He is holding back and I can't blame him. I suppose in his own little head he does sort of think why has my dad stopped seeing me, why has he left me. And he's probably a bit apprehensive that I am going to disappear again, so you know it just seems a bit, I can't think of the right words. We have 5 hours now every fortnight.

Many relationships broke down while the fathers were in prison, and the strength of their relationships with their children was in part dependent on their status as resident/non-resident fathers prior to imprisonment.

Failure

When reflecting on their time in prison, most of the men said their relationships with their children were characterised by loss and failure. They said they had failed their children and themselves through their absence, crimes and drug/alcohol dependency. One interviewee, who experienced prison before and after his daughter was born, said,

This last one [most recent sentence], it was the worst prison sentence that I've actually done and I've done a few, you know what I mean. It hit me hard, a year away from my daughter's life. It was devastating. I felt gutted. I mean I deserved to be there, don't get me wrong, but I were gutted, it hurt a lot. Now there is still that gap from when I was in prison. It isn't as good as what it could be. You know you have missed out, although my relationship is good with her I know it should be better and it does hurt a bit, you know what I mean. I mean when you are doing things, you never think of the consequences and people don't think oh I'm going to get caught or anything like that. And when you do get caught and reality hits you, if you care enough about your children and your family, it does affect you. It hit me hard, a year away from my daughter's life.

However, some fathers interviewed tried to support their children and partners while in prison, describing themselves as 'fathering from the inside', through their continued involvement with their children, through letters, visits and phone calls. One man said,

I spoke to my girls almost every day. They always sent me their school reports, so I knew how they were doing. I wrote to them to tell them how pleased I was with them doing all that.

Motivation

All of the fathers interviewed spoke of their children and their partners as a key motivating factor in 'keeping them going' in prison. Their children were a major part of getting through their sentences. They were critical to fathers' well-being and mental health. Their children made them feel motivated and productive. Fathering pro-



A prisoner is visited by his family. Image: Action for Prisoners' Families (www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk).

vided meaning and content to these men in ways that are taken for granted with 'other parents', and in ways that may not be fully considered in the lives of (ex) offenders. One interviewee provided a powerful description of what his 10-year-old son meant to him. He separated from the mother of his child many years ago and they have had a troubled relationship ever since. As a result of his last offence he was initially not permitted access to his son but, over the past year, with help from his probation officer, he has now secured one and half hours supervised access every fortnight. He says,

My son means everything to me, I can't really explain [how] I lived my life up until I had my son and then when I had my son I felt like it was almost, and this might sound exaggerated but like he gave birth to me, you know. I didn't know what I did until I had a son because all the time I was with the bairn, and sort of like had him taken away from me I didn't know what to do with myself because my time

was spent with my son, so to have him taken away from me, it was horrible, you know so. What I want is to be able to see my lad again, to take him away on holiday, to be to do..., to be free with him. Well, I want to be his father again.

Challenge

This research suggests that fathering can be resourceful, productive and generative in the context of offending, where the 'deficit model' of fathering is the norm. The challenges and dilemmas of choice faced by practitioners in key welfare professions such as social work and probation are acute. Yet this research on (ex) offenders suggests that assessing 'risk and danger', often pre-occupations in the context of vulnerable families, needs to shift away from a deficit model. This should involve: first, engaging with fathers' versions of events from a stance of openness and uncertainty, which might unsettle preconceived assumptions and practices; and secondly, working from

a 'strengths-based', 'father-inclusive' perspective, which would facilitate recognition of the generative possibilities of fathering, in the context of multiple 'deficits'. A generative approach towards (ex) offenders would then challenge dichotomies where all (ex) offender fathers are either/or – 'risky or resourceful', good or bad.³

Notes

1. British Academy Small Research Grant (SG-46093).
2. L. Walker, "His mam, my dad, my girlfriend, loads of people used to bring him up": The value of social support for (ex) offender father', *Child and Family Social Work* (in press).
3. L. Walker, "My Son Gave Birth to Me": Offending Fathers – Generative, Reflexive and Risky?', *British Journal of Social Work* (2009), doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcp063

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Bride-Price, Poverty and Domestic Violence in Uganda

A British Academy Larger Research Grant has supported the first-ever research on how 'bride-price' may link to poverty and domestic violence in Uganda. Professor Gill Hague and Dr Ravi K. Thiara explain how this innovative research was carried out, and how it is helping to change some traditional attitudes.

THE EXCHANGE OF GOODS and the giving of dowry (passing in either direction) are intrinsic to marriage rites across the world. On a simple level, for example, they include the giving of diamond engagement rings.

Another example, from many African countries and elsewhere, is the practice of 'bride-price' or 'bride-wealth'. Typically in rural Uganda this consists of a contract where cattle (or other animals) or money are paid by the groom to the bride's family in exchange for the bride.

The pioneering research was undertaken from 2008 to 2009 through an international collaboration. On the one part there was MIFUMI, an NGO and women's rights agency based in Uganda working on domestic violence and poverty alleviation. On the other there were two UK research groups – the Centre for the Study of Safety and Well-being, University of Warwick, and the then Violence Against Women Research Group (now the Centre for Gender and Violence Research), University of Bristol.

The research aimed to investigate the impacts of bride-price, and to explore possible inter-relationships between the practice and both poverty and domestic violence. It was conducted in Eastern Uganda, where bride-price takes specific traditional forms, in various sub-counties in the four Districts of Tororo, Mbale, Palisa and Budaka.

Research approach used

The approach was built on the belief that research in rural African contexts cannot be imposed, but should be developed in collaboration with local people. We used a participatory action research approach, designed to feed into

social change in a dynamic process through focused cycles of planning, action and reflection.

A key part of this approach was the recruitment of 13 community-based researchers from local rural areas. They engaged in a participatory and collaborative training process with the UK researchers, in which we designed the research tools and methods together. A total of 257 interviews across tribes and clans in Eastern Uganda were conducted in four data-sets by the local and UK researchers:

- (1) women and men with experience of bride-price ($n=180$);
- (2) women with experience of domestic violence ($n=40$);
- (3) widows ($n=10$); and
- (4) key duty-bearers, professionals and experts ($n=27$). This last set included cultural leaders (e.g. the King and Prime Minister of the principal local tribe), religious leaders from village pastors to the archbishops, the police, the human rights commission, and local and national political duty-bearers.

After analysing the data, we undertook a participatory process of critical reflection with the local researchers and MIFUMI, and together developed collaborative strategies for action at both the national and the local level; this led to two 'round-table' events and various feedback meetings. The research is currently contributing to national, pan-African and global debates on bride-price. And it has developed skills and capacity in rural Uganda at the local level, through an action-



Figure 1. Women in Uganda take a stand to 'Say No to Violence against Women and Children'. Photo: MIFUMI

oriented dissemination plan. This includes the development and delivery of a community-sensitisation training model, which created a pool of local trainers, and will feed into a collaboratively developed community-sensitisation and training programme across Districts in Eastern Uganda.

Historical context and change

In rural communities more traditional bride-price practices remain common and tend to be accepted as the cultural norm. Various respondents confirmed the importance of considering the historical context and past value of bride-price as an ancient practice which aided communities and promoted social cohesiveness and harmony. However, it was suggested that, in recent times, bride-price had become a commercialised practice, particularly in richer or professional urban communities: money and goods are more commonly given in the form of non-refundable gifts. As modernisation has impacts on social customs, so the traditional value of bride-price is now less clear.

Modern-day bride-price was considered by the vast majority of informants to cement gender inequality, giving women little power, and possibly turning them into 'commodities' to be passed from family to family, leading to entrenched inequality between husbands and wives.

Given its longstanding nature, and despite differing systems of bride-price in the country, the payment of bride-price has become a way of life, often normalised in people's minds and difficult to challenge or change. It acts as a 'certificate' of customary marriage. Reform would need another method of recognising such marriages: this is being partially addressed in the new Bridal Gifts Ordinance in Tororo, which bans bride-price in its present form and suggests it could instead be a modest gift. Reform would also need to be seen as not disrespectful to traditional ways of life. Despite this, support for reform of bride-price was almost unanimous in this study.

Positive and negative impacts of bride-price

The study assessed both the positive and negative impacts of the practice. Overall, from all the data-sets, 65 per cent of interviewees suggested that bride-price had mainly negative impacts, and almost 35 per cent that there were both negative and positive impacts. Those suggesting mainly positive impacts were less than 1 per cent.

Positive impacts included bonding the couple and the families together, giving worth and importance to the bride, and offering a

'thank you' to the bride's family. Bride-price was also seen to validate marriages and promote a woman's 'official' status as a wife and as a 'worthy' woman. Indeed, women may feel – and be viewed as – worthless, valueless and a failure if bride-price is *not* paid.

The negative impacts of bride-price were many. Examples included wives being regarded as property, and then being abused if they were seen as not being 'good value' or not performing their traditional duties.

Bride-price can lead to the 'selling' of human beings because the family needs wealth. Young girls can be de-prived of education as parents need the bride-price, and so early or forced marriage can occur. If a wife leaves without bride-price being paid back, her children may be taken away or withheld by her husband's relatives. Women's parents are unlikely to allow them to return on marriage breakdown since they cannot repay the bride-price. Women are then forced to stay in, or



Figure 2. *The community mobilises: action research as a catalyst for change. Photo: MIFUMI.*

return, to violent marriages. If her husband dies, a widow may be forced to leave the marital home and become destitute since bride-price was paid for her. The practice was shown in the inter-views to result in landlessness and homelessness for many women.

For men there are also difficult issues. Young men may not be able to marry, or may have to borrow substantially so that the married couple start off in impoverishment and debt. It may make having children impossible, as young people are entrenched in poverty, holding back development and community life. Very young brothers may be left to pay back bride-price for a sister leaving her husband.

Are bride-price and domestic violence connected?

The vast majority of interviewees in all the data-sets believed that there was a strong connection between bride-price and domestic violence, though this connection was acknowledged to be a complex one, since

domestic violence is a much broader social problem. Bride-price was recognised as a contributing factor: it can lead to men feeling that, since they have 'paid for' their wives, they have a right to dominate and control them, including through the use of violence.

Are bride-price and poverty connected?

Approximately 83 per cent of interviewees believed there was a connection between poverty and bride-price (with 12 per cent believing there was not), although the connection was recognised as complex. Wealth tends to be transferred to older, more established community members (the bride's parents) at a key time in young people's lives. Instead of a 'levelling out' effect through the transfer of wealth around a community, younger people can be left impoverished or destitute.

Difficulties created by bride-price are often issues of poverty. In poor communities people struggle for survival, and families may depend critically on the receipt of bride-price. People may therefore be turned against each other through the struggle to survive and to compete for scant resources. For example, parents may be forced to refuse to take separated daughters back because they cannot repay the cows and goats given, and brothers may drive a widow away unless the bride-price is returned, resulting in destitution and malnutrition.

Interviewees believed the overall problem to be that of entrenched poverty, but bride-price was seen as a factor in increasing it.

Are there connections with HIV infection?

A variety of ways in which bride-price may contribute to increased HIV infection were identified in the study. For example, older (undeclared or unknown) HIV-positive men may be able to attract a young wife by paying a good bride-price to her parents. Or women could be forced to stay with unfaithful husbands because of bride-price and then become infected by them.

Reform

The vast majority of informants believed that bride-price should be reformed or abolished (88 per cent of the 'members of the public' interviewees, and 98 per cent of 'duty-bearer' interviewees).



The mechanisms through which such reform could be carried out were suggested as follows:

- to make bride-price a gift of modest size, voluntarily given (and not an expectation);
- to make bride-price non-refundable;
- to outlaw the validation of customary marriage by the payment of bride-price, and to replace it with another simple form of validation;
- to remove official and religious expectations that bride-price must be paid.

Policy and legislation need to be developed by the national Government of Uganda. As an initial step, the research has been used to support the current Constitutional Petition to the Constitutional Court to make bride-price unconstitutional.

At the local level, strategies and guidelines have been developed to address violations, including the further implementation of the Tororo District Bridal Gifts Ordinance, the first of its kind. The 'round-tables' resulted in the setting-up of a 'first-ever' high-level local Committee to implement the Ordinance. The provision of advocacy and support services for those affected has been highlighted. And the development of a community-sensitisation model is facilitating grassroots work and training on bride-price, which in turn will enable the collaborative development of strategies of action in local communities. This programme of community education will also include community radio broadcasts, leaflets and sensitisation meetings.

Although progress may be slow in effecting the reforms highlighted, some have already taken place, and it is hoped that this research will help to inform and act as a catalyst for future action and change, not only across Uganda, but also in other parts of Africa.

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Dr Ravi Thiara is a Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for the Study of Safety & Wellbeing (SWELL), at the University of Warwick.

The full final report on 'Bride-Price, Poverty and Domestic Violence in Uganda' can be found via www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/news/2009/39.html

Figure 3. Women from Mifumi village train to support survivors of domestic violence. Photo: Kate Barker.

Academics, Academies and Public Policy: The Case of the American Health Care Debate

In the British Academy Fellows Seminar on 7 January 2010, Professor Theodore Marmor FBA discussed the role that academics can play in contributing to public debate, and commended the British Academy on the recent establishment of its Policy Centre. In contrast, he provided an American perspective on the lack of any organised academic input into the debate over Obama's health care proposals.

IT HAS TAKEN ME quite a lot of effort to avoid being outraged by what has gone on in the United States in the last year. If I were British, I would still be hot under the collar after reading Iowa Senator Grassley's comments about Stephen Hawking, which are totally uninformed and wrong; or gratuitous remarks about the fate of Teddy Kennedy were he to be in an NHS hospital. Not one American newspaper chastised either Grassley or the leading Republican in the Senate, McConnell, when he repeated those remarks: there was no headline anywhere saying, 'Grassley is grotesquely mistaken – Iowa voters take notice.' The norms of American journalism, particularly the so-called mainstream, are devoted to the proposition that objectivity consists of quoting both sides of a debate, even if one side of the debate is ridiculous. It produces the amplification of nonsense, on the misbegotten thesis that truth lies halfway between two sides. As Jim Hightower, a great and wonderful head of agriculture in Texas, once said, 'The only thing in the middle of the road is a yellow line or a dead armadillo.' That confusion between balance, objectivity, and the pursuit of truth as between claims has not led to any illumination.

I want to give some illustrations of what has gone wrong, in my judgement, in the debate over the so-called overhaul of American medical care in the last year or so.

What was the debate about?

I would guess that none of you have any clear idea of what it is that President Obama is in favour of when he proposes an 'overhaul of



Figure 1. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus talks with ranking member Senator Charles Grassley (right), ahead of the committee's vote on the health care reform legislation, 13 October 2009, Washington, DC. Photo: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images.

American medical care'. He has been using that expression for a year to capture these aims. His overhaul is supposed to make medical care affordable to all Americans by expanding health insurance to a large proportion of the uninsured and controlling America's huge medical costs through citizen choice of insurance plan and competition among those plans. I think it is fair to conclude that 95% of Americans, when asked, would not know what it is that is actually being proposed.

This is a really important failure of a democratic debate, a debate in which the problems of American medicine have been articulated and dramatised again and again. I know them all by heart. It does not take much to remind Americans that between 46 and 47 million of them have no health insurance at any one time. Fewer people inside or outside the United States know that something close to 90 million Americans over a two-year period experience an episode of non insurance. Many have heard that medical care expenses are the second most common cause of bankruptcy in the United States; few know that 60% of those bankruptcies are for Americans who had health insurance when they became ill. This is an important failure to understand that, although non insurance is a problem, so is

under insurance – particularly for chronically ill people. Under insurance is a much surer road to the possibilities of bankruptcy.

With regard to the quality of American medical care, there is more open disagreement. But the President and a lot of his backers in the Democratic Party – and indeed a number of Republicans in the Senate and in the House – will regularly assert that 440,000 Americans allegedly, according to the Institute of Medicine, died prematurely because of failure to care for them appropriately in American hospitals and clinics.

The cost of American medical care is repeated endlessly, but people do not actually have much idea what to make of it. What does it mean to spend \$2.4 trillion on medical care? It is a little more comprehensible if you express it on average as \$21,000 for premiums for an average family of four, or \$7,500 per person in the United States. But the other way of thinking about it is that 16–17 cents of every dollar of national income in the United States goes to medical care. Compare that to 14 cents in 2000, about 11 cents in 1990, about 9 cents in 1980, and a little over 7 cents of every dollar in 1970. We spend a lot and we feel bad about it.

That is the conventional diagnosis. But there is nothing in the description of these

problems that tells you anything about a remedy. The gap between the problems stated and the remedies offered is huge, and has been huge throughout the reform debate. Here we are in January 2010. The Senate has passed a bill. The House has passed a bill. The respective legislative leaders are going to come together, although it is uncertain as of last week whether or not the House is actually going to agree to go into a joint committee, where they work out their differences. That is the traditional way: the two bills come together, and the dominant figures from each institution choose members of the conference committee, and they do a lot of 'horse-trading' across the differences between the two.

Academic contribution to the debate

No commentator would deny the state of confusion and misunderstanding of what the policy debate is about. Nor would they deny that the problems are serious, that the suggested remedies are highly controversial, and that there is very little consensus about what would count as a useful, appropriate and affordable intervention. What I want to say instead is that no academic contribution to that debate has been significant. Most

importantly, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Institute of Medicine (of which I am a member), the National Academy of Social Insurance (of which I am one of the founding members) – none of those institutions has played any role whatsoever in disciplining any aspect of the debate. I think this is to our great loss.

In an article I wrote 18 months ago, on the basis of my earlier experience with the Clinton reform in 1992–3, I claimed it 'is obvious that there is problem consensus, but there is not consensus on the severity of the problems, and there is certainly no consensus whatsoever on what to do about it. We have no idea what will emerge from the sausage-making factory that we have got.' So I suggested that we find some American or republican (with a small 'r') form of consultation with informed, deliberate and serious people, to produce a guide to what would be the likely effects of four or five of the most prominent policies that were proposed. Not to choose among them; not to decide which ones to vote for; but to inform the democratic debate by reasoned claims about what the best understanding would be. If you tried to do policy x, what would it be like in practice? And what would be the

range of ameliorative interventions if you were going to implement a given policy that would be responsive to acknowledged vulnerabilities? I identified the four options. I suggested as participants the sort of people that you would find in the British Academy: not just experts in the policy, but also competent people who would in the presence of information be able to come to a judgement about what a citizen would make of this or that proposal – an informed and thoughtful judgement.

The fate of my particular proposal was not something to gloat over. My email got cluttered, but, then, I sent the article to lots of people. As far as I can tell, the impact of all that was modest. Here, I thought, was a profound policy 'output', but negligible practical consequences – other than for those students who could not escape listening to

Figure 2. In the run up to the crucial Congress vote, the Health Care Reform Package has continued to polarise American opinion.

Left: clinic workers express support, 17 March 2010, Oakland, California. Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images.

Right: opponents hold a 'Code Red' rally, sponsored by the American Grass Roots Coalition and the Tea Party Express, 16 March 2010, Washington, DC. Photo: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images.



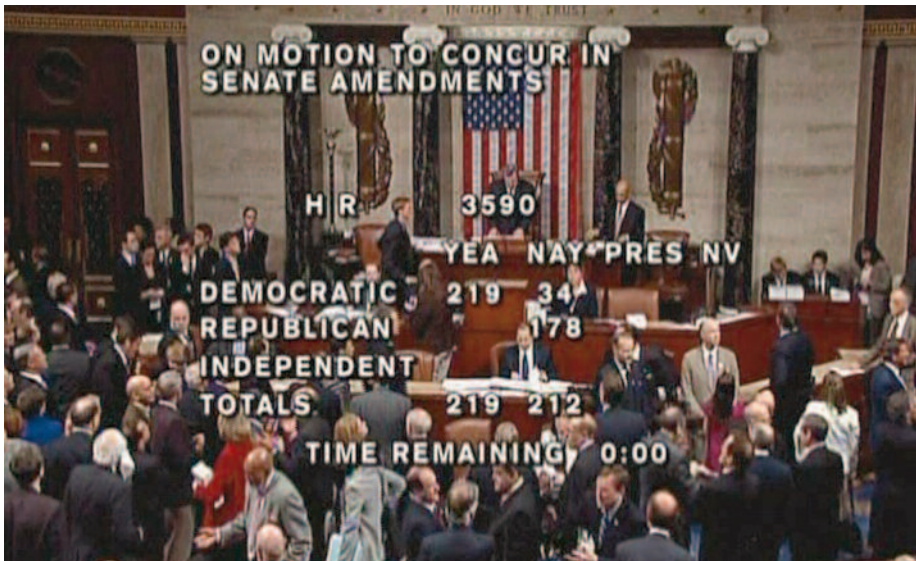


Figure 3. An overall view of the US House of Representatives chamber, after the House voted to give approval to the health care overhaul, 21 March 2010. Photo: Reuters/House TV/Handout.

me. The talk and the article did have one effect: it increased the number of speeches I was asked to give, because no one else was giving a speech quite like this. But the serious point is that neither disciplinary groups of scholars nor any of the scholarly academies, which justify their existence by their contribution to an understanding of the social order, made any attempt whatsoever to enter in this debate. They were scared to death. I think this was largely because they feared the impact in their capacity as grantees, if things went badly.

Evidence from the Netherlands and Switzerland

Here is an example of how evidence has been ignored in the debate. Obama's concept of cost control – controlling costs through patient choice of insurance plan and competition among private insurance firms – has no empirical basis whatsoever. It is theoretically possible. But the two instances that have been invoked by the advocates of this particular view are the experiences of the Netherlands from 2006 and of Switzerland from 1996. Both countries mandate that their citizens have health insurance and pay for it, with subsidies going to lower income citizens. Both have an extensive set of regulations to prevent private health insurance firms from engaging in exactly what you would think private health insurance firms would do – namely to try to select the less sick and

benefit from a disproportionate share of the healthy and the wealthy.

Without going into great detail, let me just say that in the pre-existing period in the Netherlands, that is 2004–5, 1% of the Dutch were uninsured; 99% were insured. That is in the face of a situation in which only 60% of the population were compulsorily insured, the lowest 60% of the income distribution. It was up to the remaining 40% to choose whether to buy health insurance. The Dutch are very inclined in general to purchase insurance, and all but 1% had bought health coverage. Since the law was passed, the level of non-insurance has increased to 3%, despite the fact that there is a legal requirement to do so. It does not take very much to figure out what happens. People's lives are disordered at the bottom of the income distribution: you have got a lot of people for whom the choice between paying any premiums at all and taking risks leads them into behaviour in which they could be threatened with fines, indeed imprisonment. But no Dutch government would ever agree to do that, so they bribe the insurance companies to keep people on, by paying *ex post* for the premium.

The Dutch and Swiss contexts are quite unlike the US. The behaviour of their insurance firms is partly conditioned by the laws that regulate their conduct. In addition, 50 or 60 years of experience with public

regulation of private health insurance have produced social norms about not cherry picking. Conduct that would be called cherry picking is actually treated as a subject of regulatory investigation. Both the Netherlands and Switzerland now experience considerably more non insurance than they did before they universalised it through mandates. And, beyond that, both nations have experienced increased rates of medical inflation after universal coverage was legislated.

In short, the empirical evidence from countries that have tried to do what the Obama platform calls for actually provides no empirical support for the reform proposition at all. You would have thought such a finding would have been a decisive element in the debate. Instead it was an argument made by almost no one, other than a small cadre of people at Yale University who have been urged by me to use comparative evidence for the last 30 years.

I leave you with this reflection. Here is a huge issue in American life – on the public agenda for the last two and a half years, most sharply in the presidential primary fight between Obama and Hillary Clinton. Yet academics as disciplinary representatives and academics in academies have made no organised contribution to eliminating or reducing falsehoods, pointing out truths, or in any way bordering the arguments over this reform topic. Instead they are observers, watching as the country is engaged in a debate that is misleading, is dominated by myths about what the facts are, and includes an extraordinary degree of ignorance about just how disappointing the 'it' is going to be that is going to emerge in the next few weeks or months.

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Obesity: The Welfare Regime Hypothesis

A conference held in Oxford in November 2009, with financial support from the British Academy, considered the hypothesis that obesity rates are influenced by social welfare regimes, and have risen more in market-liberal than in social-democratic societies. Professor Avner Offer FBA, Dr Rachel Pechey and Professor Stanley Ulijaszek explain the hypothesis, and report some provisional findings from research conducted since the conference.

Body weights have risen substantially in affluent societies in the last three decades. The internationally agreed measure for weight is the Body Mass Index (BMI = weight kg/height m²). By this measure, nearly two-thirds of the United States population are 'overweight' (BMI>25) and almost one-third are 'obese' (BMI>30). Obesity is bad for health, is seen as unattractive, and is known to be stigmatising. The research literature on obesity is enormous and covers many disciplines, but there is little agreement about its causes. A recent British government project (*Foresight: Tackling Obesities, Future Choices*) has produced causal diagrams of staggering complexity, but no single factor has much explanatory power. The volume of publication is inversely related to its efficacy: if rising weight is a problem, there is no reliable knowledge on how to reverse it.

The hypothesis

A new and quite simple hypothesis is beginning to emerge. The rise in body weight is associated with the attributes of welfare regimes. Since the 1980s, there has been an uneven movement in many countries away from social-democratic (or in the USA, 'New Deal') policy norms, towards more market-liberal policies. This matches the timing of the emergence of obesity as a mass social phenomenon. In its simplest form, the hypothesis is that more uncertain prospects and unequal outcomes have led to increasing stress, and that stress is conducive to weight gain. At the same time, food availability has also risen as its provision is increasingly marketised; and both the transition from manufacturing occupations to services and the increased motorisation of everyday life have reduced the opportunities for physical activity. Preliminary data analysis suggests that the most meaningful distinction in weight levels is between English-speaking market-liberal societies, and the rest.

The 'welfare regime hypothesis' is consistent with several different sets of observations. The stylised facts are that the poor suffer more from overweight than the better off, that weight has risen over time, and that obesity is about 50 per cent higher in market-liberal countries. The average of seven

market-liberal countries (extended to include Israel) c. 2000 was 23 per cent of the adult population obese, while thirteen European countries averaged an adult obesity level of only 15 per cent.

We are currently undertaking a study of the welfare regime hypothesis, funded by the BUPA Foundation. The initial step was to ascertain the current state of knowledge, for which the British Academy supported an international conference at Oxford on 27–28 November 2009. The conference brought together a dozen expert speakers, and attracted more than 80 participants from Britain and overseas, many of them renowned experts in their own right.

Possible mechanisms linking obesity with welfare regimes

Three mechanisms are proposed for the link between obesity and welfare regimes. One is the 'food shock' interpretation. The cost of food has fallen sharply as a percentage of income. Supermarkets and fast food outlets have made precooked food more easily available. Producers have incorporated appetising ingredients of high energy density into processed foods, particularly sugar and fat, seasoned by salt. That still does not explain why overeaters fail to stop.



Figure 1. Pedestrians and cyclists in Trollhaettan, Sweden. What is it about Scandinavian societies that cause their citizens to feature so low in obesity rankings? Photo: Sven Nackstrand/AFP/Getty Images.

The second mechanism, first proposed by Trent Smith (Washington State University), proceeds from the observation that animals facing food uncertainty in captivity and in the wild tend to gain weight. The hypothesis is that market societies create more uncertain environments, especially for people of lower socio-economic status.

The third mechanism – associated with Professors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (Nottingham and York) – is that the stress arises from inequality. The mechanism is the stress of subordination.

November 2009 conference

A range of perspectives were presented at the conference. Professor John Komlos (Munich) outlined the rise of obesity, and introduced a rich American dataset. He showed that the onset of recent obesity was first foreshadowed in the 1920s. Professor Thorkild Sorensen (Copenhagen) described uniquely rich individual cross-referenced health records in Denmark, and was also able to detect early anticipations of the obesity increase. He stressed the role of the maternal environment. Professor Peter Whybrow (UCLA) pointed to a link between the sleep deficits incurred in consumer societies due to competitive time pressure, and the rise in body weight. Professor Adam Drewnowski (University of Washington, Seattle), showed a strong link between socio-economic status

and body weight at the level of individual households, using incomes, rentals, and property values in the Seattle area. Professor Robin Dunbar FBA (Oxford) demonstrated the link between the larger brain and the efficient gut required to keep it fed. Prehistoric fertility figurines suggested a long history for obesity. Dr James Stubbs described links between appetite, stress and energy balance, while Georgina Cairns discussed relationships between obesity and food marketing.

In a keynote lecture, Professor Trent Smith elaborated on the stress mechanisms that underlie the welfare regime hypothesis. ‘Time inconsistency’ describes how an inferior choice (overeating) is preferred over one that is objectively better (stable body weight), but it does not explain why overeating is so attractive in the first place. Professor Smith’s approach provided the missing link: overeating appears to be driven by stress. His approach links it to a ‘wired’ response to uncertainty, which is widely observed in animal behaviour.

The welfare regime hypothesis itself was presented by the authors of this paper. They also suggested that (following the trajectories of previous harmful innovations) the growth of obesity might moderate of its own accord, due to social and personal learning. Such moderation is already being observed. Professors Wilkinson (Nottingham) and

Pickett (York) provided compelling statistics on the link between inequality and obesity, and Professor Sir Michael Marmot FBA (University College London) spoke about the stresses of inequality.

It is our intention to bring the contributions together in a book to be published by the British Academy in 2011.

Further research

Insecurity stress and inequality stress mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, and indeed they are complementary to the ‘food shock’ hypothesis. In the conference presentations, the evidence seemed to tilt towards inequality as the main mechanism. Most of the work presented at the conference represented research already completed. For the welfare regime study, however, the conference was only the initial step. Our research design proceeds in two stages. The first is a pooling of the results of surveys, at country and region level, in different countries within a single decade. In the second stage, we intend to investigate individual-level data from a smaller number of countries over a longer period of time.

Initial testing using country-level survey evidence

In the time since the conference, we have had the opportunity to analyse some of the stock of obesity surveys. We studied 75 such surveys, all of them dating from the period between 1994 and 2004, in 11 different countries, including the four largest western English-speaking ones. Some outline results are presented in Figures 2 and 3.

The statistic to be explained is the percentage level of obesity in the surveyed population, which ranged from 6 per cent (self-reported) in one Norwegian survey, to 32 per cent (measured) in an American one. The analysis tests for the impact of levels of security and equality. These levels were derived from indices compiled by Lars Osberg (Dalhousie University, Canada), based on the Luxemburg individual-level household surveys. They are scaled 1 to 100 (the same as obesity percentage), and their amplitudes from top to bottom are similar to each other. Other

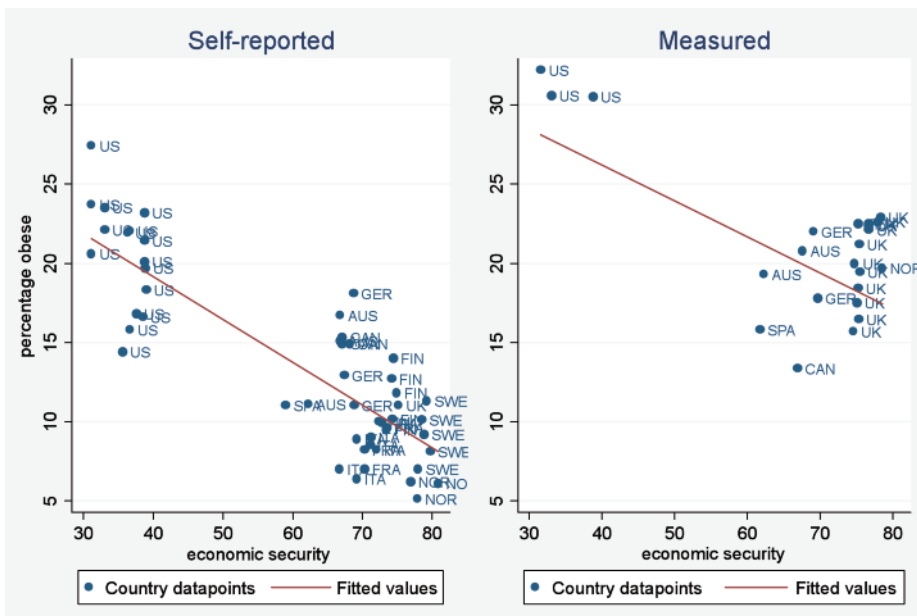


Figure 2. Obesity and economic security.

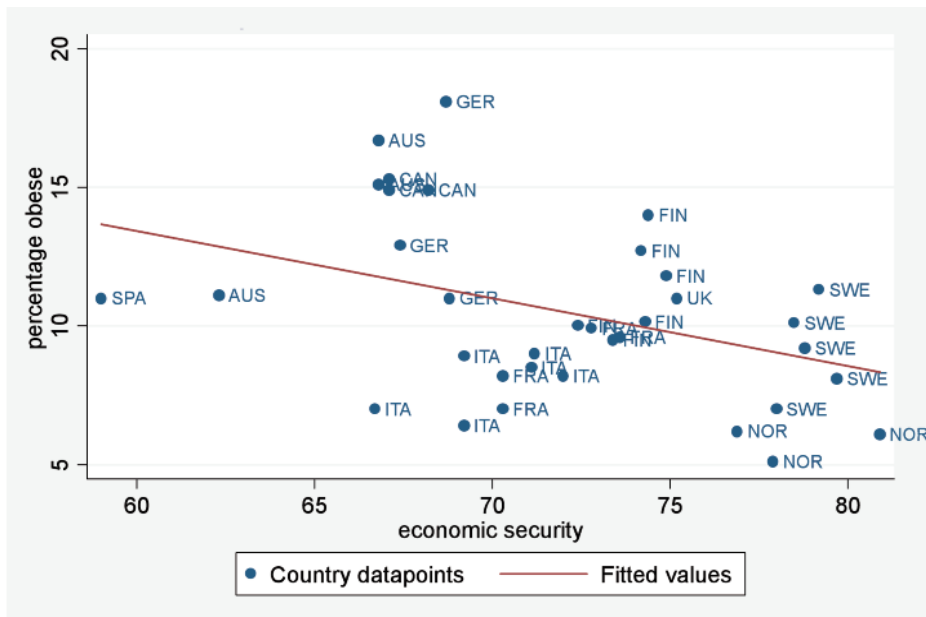


Figure 3. Self-reported obesity and economic security, excluding USA.

variables control for 'market-liberal society' (USA, UK, Canada, Australia), for 'time', and for 'self-reporting'. The other countries are Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, and Sweden. We ran the analysis separately for total obesity; for men; for women; and without the United States, which is an outlier. A food price variable (based on the Economist's 'Big Mac' price index) was found to be interchangeable with time in large measure.

Preliminary results

Economic insecurity and 'market-liberal' welfare regime are the two strongest determinants of the level of obesity. The gap between the survey with the lowest level of security and the one with the highest level is 26 percentage points of obesity prevalence. Of this, economic insecurity would explain about 12 percentage points, and market liberalism another 5, i.e. together about two-thirds. Economic equality, on the other hand, has only one-third of the effect of security on total obesity, and the coefficient is positive (i.e. the wrong sign for a determinant of obesity). With a maximum of obesity prevalence at 32 percent, and keeping other things constant, self-reporting reduced obesity levels by 7 percentage points. Time might be thought of as the impact of the food supply shock, and each year added about 0.5 percentage points, or about 5 percentage points over 10 years.

When the analysis is run separately for men and women, economic equality becomes statistically insignificant, and the effect of market liberalism is greatly reduced, but economic security remains robust and strong. On the face of it therefore, insecurity has a powerful effect on obesity. Combined with independent effects of market-liberal regimes, it lends support to the insecurity version of the welfare regime hypothesis. The effect is strong, with about 75 per cent of the total variance being explained in the analysis.

These results are preliminary, and other specifications need to be tested. Figure 2 gives some sense of the distribution. It plots economic security against obesity levels. The United States is a strong outlier. Indeed, when it is removed from the sample, security and equality drop out as significant variables, but the 'market-liberal' variable remains strong and significant. However, when the non-US sample is restricted to self-reported data, the relation between economic insecurity, market liberalism, and obesity is restored (Figure 3).

Another test for the hypothesis is whether not only levels of obesity are higher in competitive market-liberal societies, but rates of increase are higher as well. We have just seen new data which appear to confirm this possibility.

The next stage is to move from country-level surveys, to individual-level ones. This will

bring much more data into play, and cover longer periods of time. To begin with, our intention is to investigate US, UK and Danish individual-level weight data starting in the mid-1970s. This will provide a more powerful, though still not decisive, test. We have identified several other countries for which cross-sectional individual-level data exist over long periods of time. We are now working to gain access to this information and plan to add it to our dataset.

Implications

The study is still in its early days. The implications, however, are large. If the hypothesis is confirmed, then it has a bearing on larger policy norms, and especially on the benefits of free markets versus more regulated ones. It suggests that the economic benefits of flexible and open markets, such as they are, may be offset by costs to personal and public health which are rarely taken into account. The controlled market economies in the sample all support affluent societies. They also appear to perform better on this important measure of public health.

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The conference, held on 27–28 November 2009 and organised by the Unit for Biocultural Variation and Obesity at the University of Oxford, was assisted financially through the British Academy's Conference Support scheme.

'Good Allies': How Australia and New Zealand entered the Vietnam War

Dr Caroline Page received a British Academy Small Research Grant to study the interplay between official propaganda and public opinion on the Vietnam War in Australia and New Zealand, 1965–1973. Here she reveals how the need to be perceived as good allies of the US drew the two countries into greater involvement in the war.

AUSTRALIA'S MILITARY participation in the Vietnam War lasted from 1965 until the withdrawal of the last troops in December 1971, and at its peak combat forces numbered 8,300 men. Right from the start of the war there was opposition to Australia's military commitment, increasing in both numbers and violence as the war ground on – continuing through the troop withdrawals from 1970 to 1971, and even after the Peace Treaty was signed in 1973. It was not until after 1974 that anti-war opposition finally subsided; and it was not until a decade later that Australia began to take stock of what involvement in the war and its outcome meant for Australian politics, policy, and society. There was strong and vocal opposition to the war in New Zealand too – despite the much smaller professional military contingent that it contributed. But whereas Australia's relationship with the US survived the Vietnam debacle, New Zealand's did not, and the end of the Vietnam War heralded a new direction in foreign policy, which was no longer aimed at retaining US goodwill, and thus protection, at any cost.

Yet in 1965, the war was considered to be so important to Australia and New Zealand that they decided to dispatch combat troops – even though the UK refused to involve itself militarily – thereby breaking with their traditional foreign policy alignment with the UK. However, the substantive reasons for Australasian military participation (as distinct from their previous non-military assistance to South Vietnam) were little known for many years, obscured by official rhetoric that was regarded as essential for the maintenance of some semblance of popular support, national pride, and retention (if possible) of the international moral high-ground that initially accompanied a major conflict in support of a Western ally against a Communist enemy.

Private justification

Privately, for both the Australian and New Zealand governments, combat involvement in the Vietnam War alongside the US was viewed as a necessity in terms of national security. Both governments believed that the US presence and power were needed to



Figure 1. Front page headline from Australia's 'The Sun' newspaper, 29 April 1965.

replace the clearly diminishing British role, and thereby guarantee their safety as Great Britain had formerly done prior to World War II. Thus, soon after the end of World War II, they signed the SEATO and ANZUS security pacts, with the latter being a pact solely between Australia, New Zealand and the US. At this time both countries perceived Communist China as a particular regional threat, along with other Communist-inspired insurgencies in Malaya and Indonesia. But, despite this shared perception about national security requirements and regional threats, the Australian and New Zealand governments approached military participation in the Vietnam War with radically different attitudes and expectations.

Australian ministers perceived the war as an event requiring a US military force which, by its very presence in the region, would bolster Australian national security. Moreover, it was also an event which offered a valuable opportunity to demonstrate Australia's virtues as a faithful ally, and thereby incur US gratitude in the form of a continuing US security umbrella for Australia and the region.¹ There was thus, to begin with, a degree of official Australian 'enthusiasm' for the war which could, on occasions, make life more difficult for its Antipodean neighbour (and sometimes for the Americans).

New Zealand ministers, by contrast, regarded the war as something of a necessary evil: necessary because New Zealand too needed the US security guarantee, and would therefore be required to pay its dues; but an evil because, as Roberto Rabel relates in his analysis of New Zealand's involvement, the decision to increase and change the commitment was accompanied by considerable misgivings about the war. As the Secretary for External Affairs expressed it: 'We can't afford to be left too far behind Australia and we can't afford not to support the Americans – though I have the gravest doubts about their coming out of this with any degree of success.'²

Public propaganda

What is striking about both governments' perceptions of the important aspects of the conflict is the fact that the fate of South Vietnam was absent from their private calculations. Neither government went to war in order to keep South Vietnam 'free' and 'democratic' (nor to assist it in any possible aspirations to become free and democratic), or even to repel international Communist encroachment. And yet it was these latter claims that formed the major themes in

Figure 2. Australian troops shown crossing the Dong Nai River, as they pushed deep into Viet Cong territory in the first full Australian operation combined with New Zealand artillery units in the Northern sector zone, 10 August 1965. Photo: © 2004 Topham Picturepoint/TopFoto.co.uk.



the Australian and New Zealand official propaganda campaigns: admitting publicly that combat troops would be dispatched to Vietnam mainly in order to retain US goodwill, against a future day when it might be needed, would be rather less likely to generate popular support for the war than these nobler justifications. So, from the very beginning of escalation of the war in 1965, there was already a wide gulf between these governments' private and public reasons for the need to increase military involvement. And over time it was this gulf, with its underlying contradictions, that caused problems not only in regard to domestic support for the war, but also with their principal fighting ally, the Americans, because of the impact that it had on war and propaganda policies.

Limited deployment

The underlying rationale had important implications for these governments' decisions concerning the numbers of troops to be dispatched. For though the Australian government displayed an enthusiasm for the war that was lacking among New Zealand's ministers and sent more troops, nevertheless it shared the New Zealand government's desire to send as small a force as was consonant with being perceived as a 'good ally' – which was the primary purpose of the venture. This set both governments on a policy path that it was difficult to tread successfully, in terms of both domestic support and allied satisfaction. When Australian Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies first announced the decision to send around 800 combat troops to Vietnam, on the following day, 30 April 1965, *The Australian* newspaper commented in front-page editorial extractions: '... Australia's contingent can

have only insignificant military value ... it will be purely a political pawn in a situation in which Australia has no responsibility.' And the editorial labelled the government's decision 'reckless', reckoning that the country might live to regret it, opining that the decision was taken '... so that America may shelve a tiny bit of her embarrassment'. Despite these editorial judgements, US President Lyndon Johnson expressed his delight with the Australian government's actions, and *The Australian's* front-page also carried the text of the President's appreciative letter to Sir Robert Menzies. Thus the initial troop commitment appeared to have fulfilled its purpose of satisfying US requirements whilst remaining limited in numbers.

In the case of New Zealand, after receiving a private request for a military contribution at the end of 1964 from the US President, Prime Minister Keith Holyoake and his advisers deliberately chose to send an artillery battery, which, whilst undoubtedly constituting a contribution of known excellence – 'the best artillery available in the world' according to the Prime Minister – was also designed to minimise New Zealand casualties, and thereby both reassure the public and render the increased involvement more acceptable (*Evening Post*, 29 May 1965).

US reactions

However, by the beginning of December 1965, only eight months later, and after an August increment of 350 support troops, the size of the Australian force – which was considerably larger than New Zealand's – was already a source of dissatisfaction in the US, according to a 1 December report in *The Australian*:

The United States has asked Australia to send more combat troops to Vietnam, and the Federal Government has agreed in principle to do so.

Australia already has 1500 troops fighting in Vietnam. The number of extra men and the timing of their departure has not yet been decided

The chairman of the U.S. Senate armed service committee, Senator Richard Russell, was reported yesterday to have called on the U.S. State Department to put more pressure on America's allies to send more troops to Vietnam.

'Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines will all be affected drastically if the Viet Cong win, and they should be contributing a great deal more support,' he said. 'They should be allies in fact, not just in name.'

And Russell was not alone among US Senators in calling for increased allied contributions to Vietnam. In the same week that Russell commented, the Chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator William Fulbright, also took US allies to task for failing to contribute enough to their own defence; unhappily for the Australian Government, Fulbright was actually in Canberra when he made his remarks:

... Senator Fulbright, said Australia should contribute more to the defence of the West.

He is understood to have told ministers privately that Australia's defence spending should be higher and that we should have as many as 8,000 men in Vietnam. (*The Australian*, 1 December 1965)

Predictably, Fulbright's remarks in particular, pinpointing as they did the disparities in force size and delivered in Parliament's backyard, twanged nerves, and not only in Canberra: the Administration scrambled to assuage Australian sensitivities using another presidential effusion:

Washington, Thursday. – President Johnson has thanked Australia for its 'gallant efforts' in the Vietnam war ...

Authoritative sources said the message was sent on Tuesday to clear up any misunderstandings about the U.S. Government's position following a statement in Australia by Senator William Fulbright ...

A State Department spokesman, Mr R. McCloskey, said President Johnson was

deeply appreciative of Australia's contribution of about 1,700 men.

He denied a report that that the United States had asked for more Australian troops for Vietnam.

Washington officials, while taking the view that Senator Fulbright had been caught unprepared, acknowledge that his remarks had led to resentment in Australia. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 December 1965)

Junior partners

This minor contretemps encapsulated not only the difficulties associated with the Australasian governments' policies of keeping their troop commitments limited, it also highlighted this continual US requirement for more allied troops – a requirement that



Figure 3. Australian soldiers marching through Sydney before leaving for Vietnam, 25 April 1966. Photo: Central Press/Getty Images.

neither the Antipodean governments nor the Administration wished to surface publicly, much less acknowledge as fact – and it also emphasised the status of Australia and New Zealand as junior partners in the war.

And this latter problem, taken with the way in which the US ran the war – to suit US requirements – could prove very tricky for them to negotiate publicly, making it much harder for either government to 'sell' the war to their populations, as the following 17 July 1967 report from the *Australian Financial Review* makes clear:

Last week's Washington discussions on Vietnam were curiously disturbing – even to those who believe that the U.S. and its allies had little choice but to become involved in that unhappy struggle.

They were disturbing, not merely because of the atmosphere of doom, doubt and dissension which surrounded them (for a notably lucid man, Mr McNamara managed to present a totally confusing picture of American thinking), but also because of the sidelights they threw on the U.S. attitude toward less powerful allies.

Without exception, all the reports of last week's events in Washington implied that American officials expected allied nations to go along automatically with the Administration's plans and proposals.

All pretence that Australia and other nations with troops in Vietnam gave their support in response to a request from the Saigon Government was abandoned.

In addition to the military and political implications of the reported US attitude, this was also a major propaganda problem for Australia and New Zealand which continued

throughout the war and the later peace negotiations – indeed it bedevilled most activities relating to the US and Vietnam. For example, Prime Minister Holyoake was forced to issue the following statement on the February 1966 Hawaii meeting between the US and South Vietnam:

No significance could be read fairly into New Zealand's non-attendance at the talks taking place in Hawaii between the United States and South Vietnamese leaders, said the Prime Minister (Mr. Holyoake) today.

He was commenting on a Committee On Vietnam statement (see leader page) that New Zealand's omission meant that the United States merely regarded our troops as cannon fodder. (*Evening Post*, 7 February 1966)

This was precisely the impression that the New Zealand Government did not wish to be disseminated – that of a subordinate ally which was not consulted on developments and whose troops were of little regard. In his rebuttal of the Committee on Vietnam's statement, Holyoake pointed out that neither Korea with 15,000 troops in Vietnam, nor Australia with 1,400 had been invited to Hawaii – but lengthening the list of absentees was hardly an endorsement of the way in which the US treated its allies.

Considering that these problems emerged in the early stages of the war, when neither country had significant numbers of troops in Vietnam, it is obvious that as the war ground on and intensified, and as casualties mounted, these propaganda problems, and others associated with the war, could only worsen. And they would become ever more acute as organised opposition to the war increased in both countries – violently so in

Australia – questioning the official versions of the necessity for the Vietnam War, and demanding an end to the conflict.

Notes

1 See Michael Sexton, *War For the Asking: How Australia Invited itself to Vietnam* (New Holland Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd., 2002; originally published by Penguin Books, Australia Ltd., 1988) for analysis of the underlying rationale for Australian combat involvement.

2 Roberto Rabel, *New Zealand and the Vietnam War: Politics and Diplomacy* (Auckland University Press, 2005), p. 98.

Caroline Page was a Desk Officer in the Ministry of Defence before taking a PhD at the University of Reading and holding an International Fellowship at Georgetown University. After joining the Foreign Broadcast Information Service as an associate editor, she then moved to Coventry University in 1990, where she is a Senior Lecturer.

The Olympic Games: *Imagining a New Media Legacy*

Funding through the British Academy Small Grants scheme has helped Professor Andy Miah and Dr Beatriz Garcia to pursue their research into the 'non-accredited' media at the Olympic Games. Here they describe the role of this alternative media coverage, and explain its significance for Britain on the approach to London 2012.

The Olympic Games have long been the world's largest peacetime event. Its audiences reach up to 4.7 billion viewers, with over 1.5 billion people watching the Opening Ceremony alone. The number of countries that participate within the Games exceeds that of the United Nations, and the investment by some of the world's largest transnational organisations and media companies has created a media spectacle that many other mega-events have emulated.

In 1999, we began researching the Olympic Movement. We first participated as delegates at the International Olympic Academy, as well as in programmes organised by our own National Olympic Committee. In the UK, the educational work of the Olympic Movement is overseen by the British Olympic Foundation in the UK, while the Centre for Olympic Studies in Barcelona has been leading research in this area for 20 years. From these experiences, it became apparent that studying the Olympic Games required a critical interrogation of its mission, which extends well beyond the sports competitions.

Olympic ideals

The Olympic Movement is unlike most other sports organisations in that it holds itself up to high social aspirations. It is underpinned by a Charter, which sets out the range of its ideological commitments: such references to protecting 'human dignity', respect, fair play, non-discrimination and inclusion are made explicit, and align it with the work of a range of international non-governmental organisations. To this end, the modern Olympic Movement has been as much about global cultural and political collaboration, as it has been about the competitions themselves. In the original vision of the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the sports were the mechanism through which a range of social issues could be addressed, particularly inspiring youth, and building social cohesion and mutual understanding across cultures.

Over the last 116 years, these aspirations for the Games have been challenged politically and financially. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) rescued itself from financial ruin in the 1980s through the negotiation of broadcast revenue rights and its worldwide sponsorship programme. However, this salvation has also become part of what makes the Olympics so controversial: many advocates of the Olympic Movement feel that the over-commercialisation has led to the

devaluing of the Olympic ideals. The tangible elements of these concerns involve the privileged position sponsors enjoy in receiving tickets to sports and ceremonies during the Games, or being able to select a high proportion of people to act as torchbearers, without any expectation of public accountability. Each Olympic Games involves a negotiation of these power relationships between private sponsors and the public good.



Figure 1. *The first Coca-Cola torchbearer at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics.* Photo: © VANOC/COVAN.

Research

In this context, our research has focused on examining the cultural, media and political aspects of the Games. Sometimes, there is an explicit interaction between these dimensions and the sports events. At the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, the IOC was able to negotiate a situation where athletes from North and South Korea – two countries still technically at war – were able to enter the Opening Ceremony hand in hand, under one common flag. Many other examples like this provide a glimpse of the complex and rich historical tapestry that constitutes the Olympic Games. As the IOC negotiates the difficult



Figure 2. 'Olympic Tent Village': a staged occupation of a vacant lot in Down Town East Side, Vancouver, during the Olympic Games, 18 February 2010. Photo: Andy Miah.

path of undertaking geopolitical collaboration while aspiring to be an apolitical organisation, each Olympic Games becomes a focal point for highlighting the critical political concerns of a nation, region or city.

Our research has taken us to each Winter and Summer Olympic Games city since Sydney 2000, at which we have worked as embedded researchers within operational media centres. This field work has involved spending time investigating what happens outside the sports venues, such as the China cultural village in the Beijing 2008 Olympic park – a space tucked at the back of the park, which was probably missed by most Olympic visitors. The documenting of these spaces, along with other Olympic-related activity that operates at the periphery of the programmed competition events, has dominated our approach.

With funding from the British Academy, one area we have prioritised is studying how alternative and new media communities operate around an Olympic Games. The majority of research into the role of Olympic media has focused on representational issues – such as how men and women are reported differently by commentators – or commercial aspects – such as rights holder issues, particularly for broadcasters. We wanted to focus on how the community of reporters interfaces with the cultural dimensions of the Olympic programme, with a view to assessing how these elements of the Games may gain wider recognition and how the full story of an Olympic Games is told. Typically, the accredited media do not have space, resources or time to discover these aspects. For example, how many people in the UK will have heard about the protests in Vancouver on Opening Ceremony day? What about the Olympic Tent Village, a space where Vancouver's homeless population located themselves in order to draw attention to how much homelessness had grown over the Olympic period (Figure 2)?

Non-accredited media

At the Olympic Games, most media representatives are managed via an official accreditation system controlled by the IOC and Organising Committee. Only these 'accredited journalists' have access to the

official sporting venues. Yet, since the Barcelona 1992 Games, an increasing number of non-accredited media have also emerged. And, by Sydney 2000, a substantial investment into media centres for these reporters had begun, out of the desire by the host city and regional stakeholders to promote their local assets, including their wider cultural offerings. In previously funded British Academy research at the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, we identified that the non-accredited media facilities and provision had become a central part of the Olympic delivery mechanism – particularly interesting because it operates in an ambiguously defined space within the organisational structure of an Olympics. Our work has further investigated the rise of the non-accredited media at the Olympic Games, by undertaking primary data collection at the Torino 2006 Olympic Winter Games and pre-Olympic Beijing during 2006.

These media centres are run by local stakeholders (often host city authorities, tourism and business consortiums and culture agencies), rather than the Olympic Organising Committee. They become the mouthpiece for the domestic government during the Games, while also providing stories often unrelated to the sports that dominate the main media facilities. For example, in Torino 2006, press conferences and presentations were held about the design behind the Olympic torch, in this case designed by Ferrari. At the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the opening of Beijing Airport's Terminal 5, designed by Norman Foster, was one such event that eluded the attention of the accredited media, but which attracted those journalists who wanted to know more about the architectural projects that surrounded the Games.

Our research has shown that the staging of experiences for the non-accredited media is the primary mechanism for an Olympic host city to market itself during Olympic Games time. It is also the primary route towards telling and publicising cultural stories. In the lead up to London 2012, this will involve stories about the wealth of cultural activity that is taking place around the UK within the Nations and Regions, which will form the bulk of the Cultural Olympiad

programme. These places, located away from the city of London, will require space to showcase work during the Games, or they are likely to receive no national and international coverage. No such opportunities exist within the main accredited media centres, where only the highest profile non-sports stories gain space, such as the Opening Ceremony.

Citizen reporters

Despite the expansion of Olympic media centres – both accredited and non-accredited – they still do not capture the entire journalist population which is now reporting the Games. Since Torino 2006, a growing number of *citizen reporters* have become part of the Olympic coverage story. Their rise is evident in the most recent Olympic Games, which took place last month in Vancouver. Here, six media centres were in operation, and the number of unaccredited media will have easily matched the number of accredited. The channels through which these independent media operate are varied. Some are freelance bloggers with their own websites, others are part of larger organisations. However, in all cases, the new media communities are part of very well resourced, incredibly entrepreneurial networks, whose activities now intertwine with the communication structures of Olympic stakeholders. Critical mechanisms of such relationships are social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or YouTube, where there is a much greater opportunity to have direct communication with large organisations like the IOC than has been the case in the past. In response, the IOC is now even on Twitter, Flickr, Facebook and YouTube, perhaps signalling a shift in how it works with the media.

This diverse media population naturally gives rise to a range of political views, from overtly anti-Olympic campaigns, to celebrations of the Olympic Movement, or those who utilise the Olympic platform to promote their own unrelated campaigns. The IOC expressly prohibits accredited persons – athletes, officials etc. – from engaging in such activity during Games time, and the accredited media are also highly focused on the sports competitions and under contract to celebrate the Olympic values, rather than criticise them. This is why new journalist populations at the Olympics are so crucial, as these reporters will cover non-competition related human-interest narratives and scrutinise whether cities are meeting their public obligations during Games time. Yet the twist is that, as the interest in these stories grows, the accredited media are becoming increasingly interested in reporting them too, and now there is growing collaboration between the Organising Committee, its media partners and the citizen reporters. For example, in Beijing for the 2008 Olympic Games, the BBC made use of four independent street bloggers to write and podcast for their site.

Implications for 2012 and beyond

What we conclude about what happened at an Olympic Games derives largely from the stories filed by the mass of journalists – press and broadcasters – who attend the Games and spew forth accounts of what occurs on and off the competition ground. Who those journalists are, what they do, and how they are channelled through the Olympic world each have implications for what is represented and what the billions of Olympic audiences around the globe view and read. As such, the issue of defining who is a journalist, what rights they have, and how they are managed is crucial, since these will determine what we find out about an event. Yet, the concept of ‘the journalist’ has

changed and, with it, the management tasks of the Olympic Games and its host cities. Nevertheless, our newly expanded concept of the journalist has resulted in more than just increased demand for media guidance, information and facilities. It has also changed who is in control. At the Vancouver Games, people on public transport were reading Twitter on their mobile devices to find out the latest score of the Canada ice hockey games. They weren’t watching television or visiting the Organising Committee website: fans live in the venues were telling them what was happening.

The word legacy is often used to describe how the Olympic Games will have a long-term value for the nation and particularly those communities that are most affected. Yet, the term legacy should not be limited to the official Olympic stakeholders. London 2012 is an opportunity to think about what would be a valuable *media legacy* for the host nation at large. The focal point for these discussions is about how the rise of new media will interface with traditional media organisations, not as a means towards the former’s appropriation, but as a mechanism towards redistributing media power and building a more critical media community within our society.



Figure 3. These iconic red mittens were the hot item at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. They received targeted marketing, and sales contributed to elite sport development in Canada. Photo: © VANOC/COVAN.

Professor Miah and Dr Garcia are completing a book on the Olympic Games for the Taylor and Francis book series ‘The Basics’. Their work can be found at www.culturalolympics.org.uk, an online educational series, which has been providing educational resources for 10 years. In February 2010, they brought a team of 10 researchers and writers to the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games working within media and cultural centres around the city, along with a Vancouver 2010 and London 2012 partnership around Cultural Olympiad content from England’s Northwest programme for 2012.

Professor Miah is Chair in the School of Creative and Cultural Industries, University of the West of Scotland, and is author of *A Digital Olympics: Cybersport, Computer Games and Citizen Media* (MIT Press, forthcoming).

Dr Garcia is Director of Impacts 08 – European Capital of Culture Research Programme at the University of Liverpool, and author of *The Olympic Games and Cultural Policy* (Routledge, 2010).

NEWTON INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIPS

On 16 February 2010, an event was held at the Royal Society to celebrate the success of the Newton International Fellowships scheme. The Fellowships are awarded by the British Academy, the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering to attract outstanding postdoctoral researchers to the UK for two years. The aim of the event was to showcase the work of the Newton Fellows, and to highlight the UK as an attractive country in which to carry out world-class research. In an introductory speech, **Professor Graham Furniss FBA** discussed the personal and professional value of establishing a network of close relationships with scholars across the world.

THE UNIVERSITIES are abuzz with speculation. Will it be 5 per cent cuts each year for the next five or will it be 10 per cent? Who will go to the wall? Where will the mergers and acquisitions be? Which departments will close? Which disciplines will be in decline? Will the supposed ring-fencing of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects mean that it is Humanities and Social Science that will be decimated? Endless speculation. In this feverish debate we have furnished ourselves with plenty of tools to fight each other with, watched by a bemused public and government – the Russell Group against the 1994 Group against Millennium Plus, even the alignment of the non-aligned staking out their battlegrounds. We have Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) scores, we have efficiency markers, we have ratios, thresholds and benchmarks, we have weighing and measuring systems that are now so sophisticated that competitiveness and ranking are absolutely integral to everything UK universities do. Designed in a time of growth, they are available for a very different purpose in a time of contraction. Admittedly, the league tables and the jockeying for position are not only built around metrics – the staff-student ratios, the numbers of research students, the completion rates, the amount of research grant income, the volume of knowledge-transfer activity – the RAE process over the years has mercifully retained at its core the judgement by colleagues of the quality of work produced, the measurability of excellence based upon human intellectual judgement. The tyranny of the quantifiable has not entirely invaded the domain of the judge-able, and long may it remain so!

But is this competitive inter-institutional jockeying the framework that supports the advancement of scholarship? It is true that there have always been rivalry and competition in the advancement of knowledge – claim and counter-claim are the drivers of debate. But ask any coal-face academic what drives them forward in their research and teaching and I'm sure it won't be more than one in a hundred who thinks of his or her institution's jockeying for position first and foremost. However they define it, I suspect that he or she will talk about their subject first and foremost, the intrinsic interest of the issues they feel passionate about. They will be focused upon those *other* people who share their concerns – their current and former research students, those

among their immediate colleagues to whom they show their material, those friends and colleagues in their international networks that they meet at conferences, those who pass on papers, comment on each others' work, people with whom they *share*. This is the everyday, invisible, unquantifiable, unmetrified, ebb and flow of intellectual life. How does it come about and how is it sustained? It comes about through getting to know people, by moving out from a departmental home, into other institutions, and into other networks. It comes about as the doctoral student becomes an early career researcher whose first articles and first published monograph make a mark, and who is then invited to a conference and then another. But what drives that kind of trajectory? It is the encounters with other individuals and the beginning of long-term academic friendships that sustain. There are of course lone scholars whose very aloneness sustains a productive scholarly life. But surely for most it is an array of different forms of commitment, of relationships built on trust, that sustains a scholarly life – things like common interest, mutuality, obligation, concern, loyalty, respect, and simple friendship. Of course, the obverse of these



Figure 1. Professor Graham Furniss FBA speaking at the event to celebrate the first two years of the Newton International Fellowships scheme. Photo: Tracey Croggon.

values can equally sustain a long life of rivalry and disrespect, and we are all aware of what a motivating factor those things can be. My point is, however, that these are real drivers of what goes on underneath the measurable metrics and the competitive institutional processes that are supposed to nurture and support the advance of human knowledge within the disciplinary structures of 'the university'.

Personal experience

As a young doctoral student in Nigeria in 1973 I found myself, after some months, on the verge of abandoning my project and seeking my salvation elsewhere. Then, one evening I found myself in the private library of a Hausa scholar and politician, Malam Aminu Kano, who was a well-known opponent of the British colonial government and the conservative regime that succeeded it in Nigeria after independence. During the conversation, he asked me about my project on a group of contemporary Hausa poets and, after I had poured out all my woes, he insisted that I should not give up. He introduced me to two young lecturers at the university who unpicked the tangles I had got myself into with certain people, and with whom I began to build a friendship that lasted over many years. To become entangled in a web of ongoing obligations, exchange, mutuality, trust and commitment has been one of the pleasures of my academic life, and the fact that I am here now at all is down to that one moment in Kano in 1973. Later on, both those lecturers came for periods of time to London. While I know they would say they benefited enormously from the many friendships they made in the UK, it was we who benefited more from their knowledge, their perspectives, and their questions.

You can see where I am going. Knowledge is an ever more unbounded business built upon trust and reciprocity. While the UK Border Agency may make it harder and harder for colleagues to come to this country, technology can mitigate the damage in terms of sending and receiving messages – but it cannot in the end substitute for the face to face process of making friends and building trust between people. The Newton International Fellowships scheme, which we celebrate today, crucially addresses the need to build those relationships that, one hopes, will be sustained over a lifetime. Does it build on measurable excellence? – yes it does, through the judgements that are made about quality, quality of project and quality of people. Does it build on mutuality? – yes it does, by providing for the best talent from abroad to build their relationships here in the UK. It exposes UK scholarly communities to people who can bring new perspectives, new questions. It can open up possible UK parochialism to the existence of whole other communities of scholarship, and this will be ever more significant as universities in China, the Indian sub-continent, and elsewhere, come to populate and re-orient the scholarly networks in

the years to come. And the Newton Fellowships are designed with an afterlife to them. An alumni network and further support will look to refresh and renew the relationships that have been established over the two years. In the course of discussing frameworks for collaboration between UK and African scholars working in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the result of which was the joint British Academy/ACU *Nairobi Report*,¹ it became apparent that, for many younger scholars, it is the ongoing opportunity to maintain and build upon friendships and working relationships beyond the period of a Scholarship or Fellowship that is crucial to longer-term productivity as a researcher and vitality as a teacher. It is an issue that the Commonwealth Scholarships Commission are very aware of and one which it is good to see the Newton Fellowship scheme is addressing.

I congratulate all Newton Fellows here present and I wish you both success in your academic enterprises, and most of all, I hope you will be able to say, as Humphrey Bogart says to Claude Rains at the end of the film *Casablanca*, 'This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship!'

Note

- 1 *The Nairobi Report: Frameworks for Africa–UK Research Collaboration in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, published by the British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities in March 2009.

Professor Graham Furniss is Pro-Director for Research and Enterprise at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. He is the Chairman of the British Academy's Africa Panel.

newton
international fellowships •

The Newton International Fellowships aim to attract the world's best postdoctoral researchers to the UK for two years. Funding for follow-on activities may be available for up to 10 years after the Newton International Fellows have returned overseas, with the aim of maintaining links with the UK. The Fellowships cover the broad range of natural and social sciences, engineering and the humanities. Further information may be found at www.newtonfellowships.org

Death Tolls and our Perception of Human Fatalities

IMAGINE HEARING about two tragic events on the news: one in which 10 people have died and another in which 1,000 people have died. Surely you would probably feel worse about the latter, deadlier event. But would you feel *100 times* worse? Probably not, even though the latter death toll is indeed 100 times larger than the former. Now imagine that as you continue to follow these two stories it is suddenly announced that the death toll of each event has risen by 10. How much worse would you feel? For most of us, an increase from 10 deaths to 20 deaths seems, at least intuitively, like a huge difference, while an increase from 1,000 to 1,010 deaths feels like a relatively trivial increase in fatalities. Such reactions are all too human, yet they represent striking violations of the notion that every human life is equally important.

Diminishing sensitivity

A large body of research in psychology and economics has demonstrated what the above examples were meant to illustrate, namely that people tend to exhibit a diminishing sensitivity to human fatalities. In other words, as an event's death toll increases, each additional death seems less and less shocking to us, until the numbers are overwhelming and we succumb to 'psychic numbing' – the inability to distinguish between large death tolls on an emotional level.

This diminishing sensitivity to human life has enormous implications. Each year, millions of lives are lost to accidents, disasters, epidemics, armed conflicts, and other deadly events. Those of us living in wealthy industrialised nations have the material power to mitigate their impact and save lives. Yet our willingness to send aid to the victims of these events, or to pressure our governments into intervention, depends critically on the extent to which we are moved by the size of their associated death tolls. A diminishing sensitivity to fatalities involved means that public reactions to humanitarian crises and other tragedies will not be proportional to the numbers of victims involved, and may instead depend on other, less important factors.

Valuation through comparison

Although copiously documented, and despite having grave implications, the reason for our diminishing sensitivity to fatalities was, until recently, pretty much a mystery. However, in a paper published in December 2009 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*,¹ we offered an explanation for this pattern and tested some additional implications of our account. Our model builds on a recently developed psychological theory that was designed to explain how people evaluate abstract economic quantities, such as money, time, and probability. In contrast to standard models of decision making, which simply assume that we (somehow) have *absolute* built-in

The news coverage of the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile has been dominated by reports of ever increasing death tolls. One of the British Academy-funded Newton International Fellows, Dr Christopher Olivola, offers an explanation of why as individuals we react in such contrasting ways to different mortality rates.

subjective values for sums of money and other variables, this theory posits that we evaluate quantities in a relative fashion. In order to do so, we compare target quantities to other comparison amounts that we have observed in the past. The subjective size or value we assign to an amount is simply its relative rank (or percentile) within the comparison set. According to this approach, then, absolute valuation is an illusion that actually comes about through relative comparisons.

In the case of human fatalities, the subjective 'shock value' (or 'disutility') of a given death toll (e.g., 100 dead) would be determined by comparing it to other deadly events drawn from memory, and seeing where it stands relative to those events. For example, we might compare it with disasters and wars that we have recently learned about from watching the news, reading a newspaper, or conversing with family, friends or colleagues. Thus, a given death toll will seem large if it happens to be larger than most of the other death tolls we've observed in the past (or small if it ranks below most of them), *regardless of its absolute magnitude.*

Personal experiences

A critical implication of this model is that a person's reaction to a given death toll will be governed by the distribution of comparison fatalities that she can draw from, which will be a function of her accumulated experiences. For someone accustomed to hearing about events

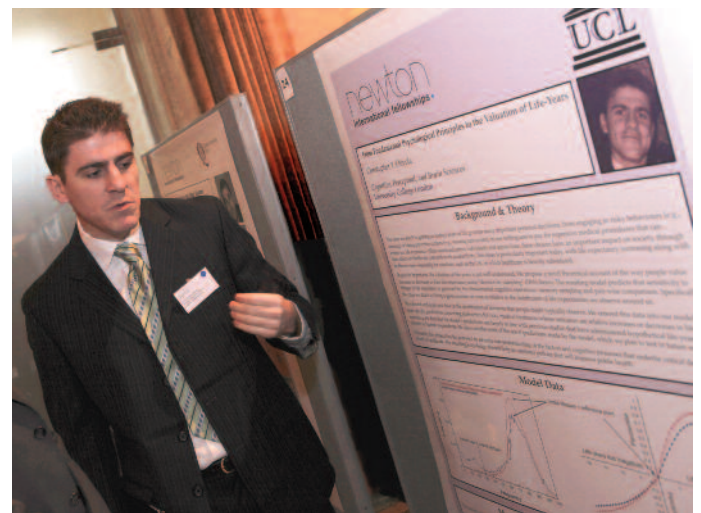


Figure 1. At the event held on 16 February 2010 to showcase the Newton International Fellowships scheme, Dr Olivola gave a poster presentation on 'From Fundamental Psychological Principles to the Valuation of Life-Years'. Understanding how individuals perceive their own life expectancy, and adjust their behaviour accordingly, has enormous implications for health policies. Photo: Tracey Croggon.

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100,000
GONE
IN 60
SECONDS

GRIEF-STRICKEN
 Girl in the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince

Toll could hit half a million
 By ANDREW GREGORY
 A GIRL wails desperately in Haiti yesterday as a stunned world learned at least 100,000 died in its earthquake. Distraught Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive announced the massive toll while witnesses told how the victims died in 60 seconds of mayhem as buildings collapsed on them. But one estimate predicted the final toll could reach 500,000, making it the second most devastating quake in recorded history.
FULL STORY: PAGES 6&7

Figure 2. The front page of the 'Daily Mirror', 14 January 2010, reports the Haiti earthquake. 'Toll could hit half a million' speculates the sub heading. Image: Mirropix.

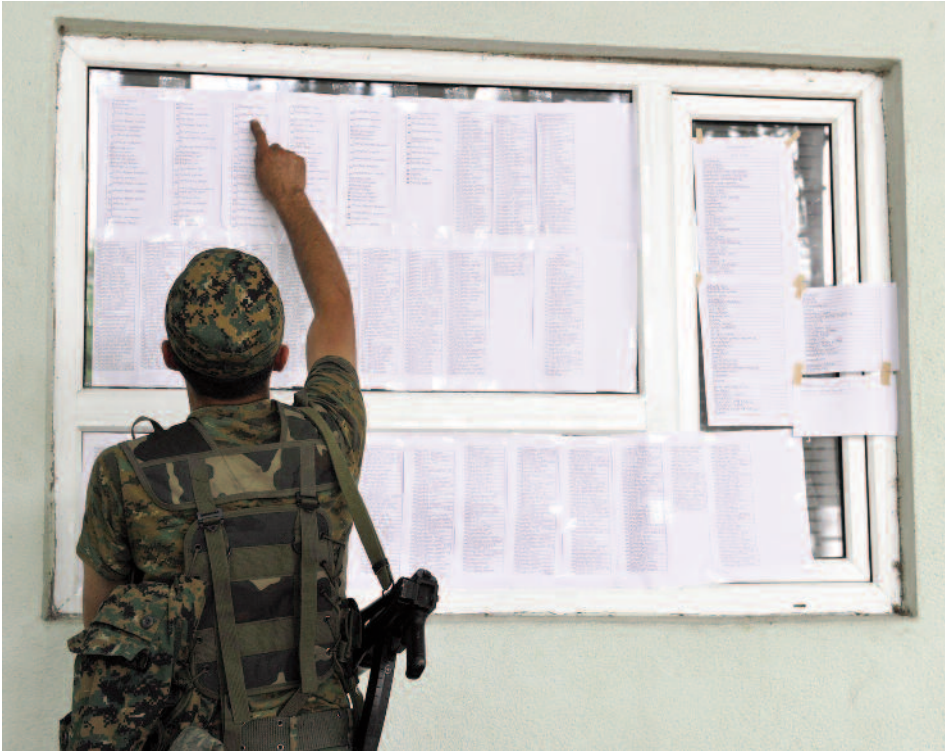


Figure 3. A Georgian soldier studies a list of casualties in the short war between Russia and Georgia, August 2008. Despite early claims of ‘thousands’ of civilian victims, the death toll in the war seems to have been in the hundreds. Photo: Dimitar Dilkov/AFP/Getty Images.

involving thousands of deaths, a hundred fatalities will not seem very shocking, while the opposite would be true for someone who was only used to hearing about events involving fewer than a hundred deaths.

So how does this account explain our diminishing sensitivity to human fatalities? It turns out that the deadliness of an event is inversely related to its frequency: most events involve very few deaths, while only a few events involve many deaths. As a consequence, our model predicts that we will be highly sensitive to differences between small death tolls and highly insensitive to differences between large death tolls. The diminishing sensitivity to human life thus stems from the distribution of death tolls we tend to observe and the relative comparison process that governs our evaluations.

National differences

An interesting prediction that comes out of this model is that sensitivity to human fatalities should differ across countries, according to the distribution of death tolls they are typically exposed to. In a country such as the UK, which is unused to mass deaths, a medium-scale disaster will seem really shocking, but the shock value will quickly start to blur as the numbers increase so that large-scale events will seem indistinguishable. However, in a country where mass deaths are more common, a medium-scale disaster may seem less shocking, but people will be more sensitive to differences in magnitude between large-scale events because they have observed many more of them. To test this prediction, we surveyed respondents in India, Indonesia, Japan, and the US. As the model predicted, we found evidence of greater diminishing sensitivity to fatalities in the latter two countries (which

tend to experience relatively fewer large-scale disasters) than in the former two.

In sum, this new research stresses that our responses to humanitarian crises are fundamentally relative and shaped by the environment we live in – in particular the frequency with which we observe small or large death tolls in the news and in our day-to-day lives. On a theoretical level, our model and results fundamentally challenge the view that the value we place on human lives is governed by stable underlying disutility functions. On a practical level, they advance our understanding of people’s reactions to humanitarian crises and other deadly events. For example, it would seem that wealthy nations, which have the resources to help those countries most affected by mass deaths, also have populations that are most likely to show a diminishing sensitivity to human fatalities. We hope this knowledge will ultimately help save many lives.

Note

- 1 Christopher Y. Olivola & Namika Sagara, ‘Distributions of observed death tolls govern sensitivity to human fatalities’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 106:52 (29 December 2009), 22151–22156. www.pnas.org/content/106/52/22151.abstract

Dr Christopher Olivola is a Newton International Fellow in the Cognitive, Perceptual, and Brain Sciences Department, at University College London.

'The natives ... enquired what the Spaniards wanted. [They] answered "Food".'

(Peter Martyr, *De Orbe Novo*, 1521)

The British Academy and the Mexican Embassy collaborated to organise a public study day at the British Museum on 'Moctezuma's Feast', linked to the Museum's 'Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler' exhibition. The event, which took place on 21 November 2009, offered lively presentations on topics ranging from the mystical powers attributed to the frothy foam that topped cups of Aztec hot chocolate, to the relationship between 'Tex Mex' and 'Mexican' food. The organiser, **Dr Rebecca Earle**, here describes the clash of culinary cultures following the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico.

During the Spanish conquest of the Americas, two scenes typify the encounters between Europeans and Amerindians: a battle, and a shared meal. When indigenous peoples and Iberians did not try to kill each other, they usually ate together. Hungry Spaniards were often desperate for food, and Amerindians were curious about the peculiar things consumed by the exotic bearded strangers. Spanish chronicles are full

of descriptions of such communal meals. In December 1492, Columbus recorded in his journal that after landing on one Caribbean island he offered a local ruler 'Castilian food'. Columbus did not describe the king's reaction, beyond noting that he ate only a mouthful, giving the rest to his entourage. Other accounts offer more detail. A 16th-century Italian traveller wrote that on being given a Spanish meal one group of Amerindians in Venezuela, 'laughing at such food', threw it to their dogs. Another early colonial indigenous source reports that Spanish food was almost like 'human food'.¹

The Spaniards who settled the Americas in the 16th and 17th centuries displayed similar ambivalence about indigenous foods. Certain items, such as the snakes and insects widely consumed by Amerindians in Meso-America, were generally dismissed as disgusting. Cannibalism, which was not merely disgusting but also a dreadful sin, was often presented as another characteristically mistaken indigenous culinary



Figure 1. Dr Rebecca Earle talks about the chocolate drink at the study day in November 2009. Photo: Tracey Croggon.



Figure 2. An indigenous woman pours chocolate from one pot to another to develop a froth. *Codex Tudela, 16th century.*

Figure 3. An early image of a pineapple from Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's 16th-century *Historia general y natural de las Indias*.

practice. The 17th-century Spanish Jesuit Bernabé Cobo, who lived for many years in Peru, thus observed that the Indian palate 'does not spare any living thing, plant or animal, from the most noble, which is man, to the most disgusting bug or filthy thing.'² While Europeans ate proper food, Amerindians ate spiders and each other. Such contrasts, Spanish writers maintained, spoke volumes about the relative ability of Europeans and Amerindians to govern themselves.

Unequivocal hostility, however, does not typify all colonial responses to Spanish America's culinary offerings. A number of New World foods received a very positive reception from Spanish settlers. Pineapples were universally admired, chile peppers were approved for those with strong stomachs, and by the late 16th century cacao, in the form of chocolate, was widely consumed across the hemisphere. Indeed, within a few decades of the establishment of colonial settlement, chocolate was being described as a drink particularly preferred by women, and it subsequently became a major expense in Mexican convents. When their superiors tried to get them to cut back, nuns insisted that it was an aid to fasting. Colonial chroniclers and officials carefully recorded which New World foods were safe for Europeans to consume, and lavished praise on the delicious chirimoyas, the delicate avocados, the savoury vanilla pods and the tasty sweet potatoes that Europeans were encountering for the first time only after Columbus's fateful voyage in 1492.

My current research focuses both on indigenous reactions to European food, and also on how Europeans made sense of the new foods, and

new environments, of the Indies. In early modern Europe food held an unrivalled importance in assuring good health and bodily integrity, because the dominant humoral models for understanding the human body ascribed to food a unique role in determining both physical appearance and overall character. Europeans who travelled to the New World were deeply concerned about the changes that eating unfamiliar foods might provoke in their bodies – at the same time as they enjoyed chocolate and pineapples, they worried that too many tortillas would darken their skin and impede the growth of their elegant beards. They also wondered about what would happen if Amerindians stopped throwing Spanish food to the dogs and started eating it themselves. Perhaps their skin would lighten and Amerindian men would sprout beards. Were that to happen, how could one tell Europeans from Indians? Overall, I am interested in the ways in which food not only reflected, but also helped create, the most basic of the divisions shaping colonial society: that between colonisers and colonised.

Indeed, Amerindians did not throw all European food to their dogs. Although many indigenous communities remained sceptical about the value of the cattle and other European livestock that trampled their maize fields and destroyed their vegetable gardens, the less destructive chicken was quickly incorporated into indigenous domestic husbandry in many parts of Spanish America. As a result, some scholars maintain, the nutritional balance of the indigenous diet actually improved after the advent of colonisation.³ Moreover Spaniards often complained that Amerindians were all too fond of European wines and spirits, whose intoxicating effects were put to use in village festivals and celebrations, to the dismay of priests and moralists. Over time, out of these complex blendings of New and Old World ingredients and culinary systems emerged the distinctive set of cuisines that form the basis of what today are called 'Mexican' or 'Colombian' or 'Argentine' food, whose characteristic dishes are extolled by nationalists, savoured by young and old, and desired by emigrants far from their homelands. Food holds a particular power to instil a visceral sense of national identity. Speaking of the iconic Mexican dish *mole poblano*, a spicy sauce usually served on turkey, one Mexican writer insisted that to reject it 'could practically be considered an act of treason'.⁴

A history of Spanish American food, in other words, reveals something both about the nature of the colonial encounter – characterised as it was by a potent mixture of violence, hostility, anxiety and curiosity – and also about the transformations set in motion by European colonisation, which led, some 300 years after Columbus's first voyage, to the establishment of independent nation-states from Tierra del Fuego to the Rio Grande. By paying attention to food, we pay attention to some of the most important forces – colonialism, slavery (whose predominance in the Americas was due almost entirely to the European demand for sugar), and nationalism – that have shaped the region's history, and we also acquire a more nuanced sense of how these large historical processes intersected with the lived experience of individual people, such as the Amerindians who laughed at Spanish food or the Mexican nuns who refused to abstain from chocolate, despite the condemnation of disapproving Spanish superiors.

Eating, in sum, is a fundamental and quotidian human activity, and for this reason, as the anthropologist Levi Strauss put it, food is usually good not only to eat, but also to think with.

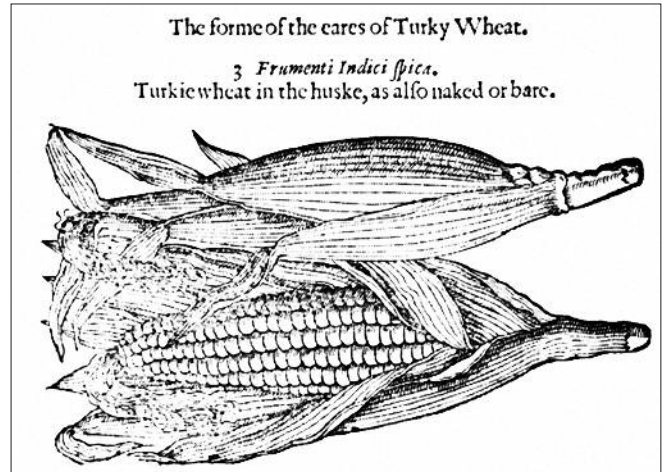


Figure 4. A staple from the Americas. Left: a variety of maize cobs. Right: an early English illustration of 'turkey wheat', from John Gerard's 1633 'Herball'.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Columbus, *Los cuatro viajes del almirante y su testamento*, ed. Ignacio Anzoátegui (Madrid, 1971), p. 92; José Rafael Lovera, 'Intercambios y transformaciones alimentarias en Venezuela colonial: diversidad de panes y de gente', *Conquista y comida. Consecuencias del encuentro de dos mundos*, ed. Janet Long (Mexico City, 1997), p. 66; and Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Mexico City, 1992), book 12, chap. 7 (p. 766).
- 2 Bernabé Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 1653, *Obras*, ed. Francisco Mateos, 2 vols (Madrid, 1956), book 11, chap. 6 (vol. II, p. 20).
- 3 John Super, *Food, Conquest, and Colonization in Sixteenth-century Spanish America* (Albuquerque, 1988).
- 4 Alfonso Reyes, 'Memorias de cocina y bodega', *Pequeño antología*, descanso XIII, Centro Virtual Cervantes, http://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/escritores/a_reyes/default.htm

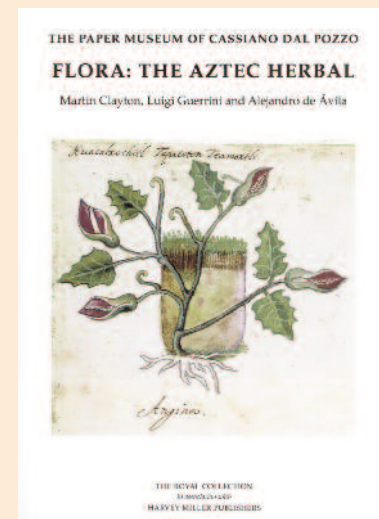
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The Aztec Herbal

The latest volume in *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo* series catalogues Cassiano's copy of the Codex Cruz-Badianus, an Aztec herbal prepared for the son of the Viceroy of Mexico in 1552 and the earliest medical text to have survived from the New World. The original codex was presented to Cassiano's patron, Cardinal Francesco Barberini, during a papal legation to Spain in 1626, and was copied on the Cardinal's return to Rome for Cassiano's fellow members of the Accademia dei Lincei, who at that time were completing their own vast illustrated natural history of Central America.

Cassiano's copy of the Codex Cruz-Badianus is preserved in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle together with the larger surviving part of his 'Paper Museum', an encyclopaedic collection of prints and drawings of antiquities, architecture and natural history subjects, acquired by George III in 1762. The collaborative endeavour to produce a catalogue raisonné of this invaluable resource is a British Academy Research Project.

The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo, Series B, Part VIII, *Flora: The Aztec Herbal*, by Martin Clayton, Luigi Guerrini and Alejandro de Ávila, was published by the Royal Collection in association with Harvey Miller Publishers in 2009.



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