

Using History, Making British Policy: the Treasury and the Foreign Office, 1950–76

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To historians, the intrinsic value of history is self-evident. However, the study of history as an intellectual activity extends beyond the careful reconstruction and critical analysis of the past. For the past seeps into the present: it shapes the identities, perceptions, and attitudes of individuals and institutions. ‘History’ and historical analogies are also widely used—and abused—in public life, and can affect policy outcomes.

Peter Beck’s volume is concerned with Whitehall in the 1960s and 1970s. He has written an assiduous, if occasionally disjointed, reconstruction of how senior civil servants who wanted a ‘meaningful common meeting ground between public policy and history in Britain’ (p. 251) thought history could be used by Whitehall for this purpose. Beck uses a wide range of archival sources from the United Kingdom National Archive, as well as the private papers of those who found themselves debating these issues over these years. He focuses upon the Treasury and the Foreign Office in particular, while also looking at the Cabinet Office and a number of other departments, and teases out his themes by using case studies that cover the period from the Public Records Act 1958 (which established the fifty-year rule), to the Public Records Act 1967 (which established the thirty-year rule), and then to the closure of the Treasury Historical Section in 1976.

This may sound dry, but the underlying significance of his theme is not only of marginal intellectual or public importance. This micro-history reveals broader themes. The key theme is how historical experience can, or should, contribute to the education of civil servants and the formulation of policy in Whitehall.

However, the book also tells us about what senior civil servants thought about their relationship with the general public, and how much they thought the general public should be told, or be able to find out, about their own past. Issues relating to freedom of information run like a thread through the book.

Beck's narrative account

By 1957, the series of wartime civil histories that had been commissioned first for Whitehall and later for the general public were coming to a close. Some of these histories had been commissioned by Edward Bridges during the war. Bridges was Cabinet Secretary from 1938 to 1956, then Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, and he was Head of the Home Civil Service, 1945–56. The volumes drew upon privileged access to records, as well as oral testimony from officials and politicians. They had been seen as indicators of both the value of sharing the wartime experience with the general public, and also as a means of passing on to future generations of civil servants the administrative efforts of those who had had to evolve policy by trial and error during exceptional times—part of what, in very curious language, came to be known as a ‘funding experience’ (p. 26).

Although the publication of these wartime histories took years if not decades, Sir Norman Brook, who took over from Lord Bridges in 1957, sought to develop the role of the historian in Whitehall in ways that would cover the postwar period too, but without falling prey to the party politics which were now a greater part of political life than they had been during the coalition period of the war. He thought that internal, rather than official, histories would therefore be the best way forward: indeed the Treasury was already doing this kind of work.

The name that recurs with greatest frequency in Beck's narrative of this period is that of the distinguished historian, Margaret Gowing. She was clearly a formidable presence in Whitehall, delivering a vast range of work that related first to the official war histories, and then, in the Treasury, material on domestic issues: *Acts of God* (floods), an unfinished piece on colonial aid, as well as shorter memoranda on specific themes. She left the Treasury in 1959, and went to the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority where she wrote her seminal works on postwar Britain and atomic energy (pp. 11–13). She was a tireless advocate of the need to have historians working in government amongst those who were developing policies and taking often difficult decisions on a day-to-day basis, and whose reflex position was that the ‘day before yesterday is dead’ (quoted at p. 13). It was her example that encouraged Brook, and his successor, Burke Trend, to promote the idea of internal histories, ‘seeded files’ (briefer accounts drawn from key files), and ‘briefing’ memoranda for the Treasury.

Historians were also at work in the Home and Overseas Planning Section. Likewise, in the Overseas Finance Division, research was carried out on the relationship between the Treasury and the British Petroleum Company, and on the 1947 convertibility crisis. The Board of Trade, as well as the Public Enterprises Division, also produced studies, although not all plans reached completion (a 1965 atomic energy project was one). It seems that the main constraint to the progress of the ‘funding experience’ project was always time, rather than funds.

By the mid 1970s, the Treasury ‘funding experience’, although delivering considerable numbers of volumes—including ones on sterling and exchange control; control of demand; external financial relations; and incomes policy—was under threat. Beck’s account indicates that the project had by then lost the backing of the most senior civil servants. Sir John Hunt, who became Cabinet Secretary in 1973, sought output that explained the lessons of the past and was more relevant (p. 164). By 1976, money for the ‘funding experience’ was itself under pressure as it was not possible to show that recent memoranda had actually made a policy impact (p. 169). Despite the volume and range of output, it seemed that even the shorter memoranda were not being read, let alone acted upon by those who mattered most—so the histories ‘were, on the whole, not what the Department needed’ (p. 181). As a result, the Treasury Historical Section was closed down in 1976. Unintentionally, many of the histories that were intended as a form of on-the-job training, and as guidance for officials, became, in the end, documents ‘for the record’ and for future historians.

At the same time, official histories, in which a chosen historian would be given unrestricted access to certain sets of records, were still being encouraged. These would allow government to keep the process under control, first through a parliamentary committee which would choose each topic and give final clearance for publication, and then by the overall management by the Cabinet Office history section. It was hoped that this would also stem the tide of demands from historians and also from specialist journalists for further access to the official records of government including the distinguished academic historian Professor Peter Hennessy, who was then working for *The Times*. Prime Minister Harold Wilson appears to have personally pushed forward this agenda of greater openness (p. 39). He also supported new legislation to reduce the closed period for archives from fifty down to thirty years which was achieved with the Public Records Act 1967.

The track record of the Foreign Office was rather different, as it had long been publishing sets of documentary records, the *Documents on British Foreign Policy* series being only the most recent in the series that stretched back to the *Blue Books* and the *British and Foreign State Papers* (p. 198), and forward to the distinguished *Documents on British Policy Overseas* series. The Foreign Office was not enthusiastic about official histories, as they might undermine or compromise contemporary policy-making in the international sphere. Sir Llewellyn Woodward’s massive history of British foreign policy during the Second World War took decades to clear security for publication. Nor did the Foreign Office commission many internal histories: that on the abortive 1963 application to the EEC was written in the Treasury. However, Con O’Neill’s work on the successful application was well received, and this was then published to some acclaim in 2000 (1).

Beck devotes considerable attention to the Foreign Office’s 1962 internal history, *British Policy in the Relinquishment of Abadan in 1951*, and this analysis is the high point of his narrative (2). The Abadan history was written as an internal history, and was an experiment to test the value of history as a formal input to the policymaking process (although the history took nearly a decade to write). Its author was Rohan Butler, and the history established his personal reputation within Whitehall, where he was to remain as the foreign secretary’s historical advisor for the next twenty years (p. 228). Beck’s treatment of this internal history is different from the rest of the book, as here we see him as an international rather than an institutional historian. This is particularly true when he reveals how Abadan was later seen in the context of Suez (possibly ‘a cause and a dress rehearsal for 1956’: p. 233) and its impact—especially in comparison to the 1930s appeasement analogies used in 1956—upon Britain’s role in the world. Beck outlines the Abadan dispute which arose when Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951, a move which resulted in the British evacuation of the refinery several months later, and then, two years later, the M16/CIA operation to secure the overthrow of Mossadegh and install the dictatorship of Mohammad Reza Shah (p. 195). He explains that Butler was not allowed complete access to all the files of the FO, or to those of other departments that had played a part in the crisis (p. 200). What is especially fascinating about this section is the account that Beck gives of how important the Abadan episode was seen to be in Whitehall itself, and how it reflected upon not only Britain’s Middle East policies and how policy was managed between departments, but also upon decisions about the use of force, the energy dimension of foreign policy, and, of course, the American dimension to Western—and Cold War—policies in the region. He also points

out how hard it was for the FO to drive policy in an area in which inter-departmental rivalries were necessarily strong (p. 207).

In the aftermath of the appearance of the publication within Whitehall, foreign secretaries and civil servants were quick to comment on both the episode (with some deft buck-passing by retired civil servants) and on the reduced role of Britain in the world, and how this could be managed by better planning (p. 223). However, Beck also demonstrates not only that the learning process that took place in Whitehall as a result of the publication was 'influential only on the margins' (p. 235), but, more interestingly, adds a new dimension to how Whitehall, and the Foreign Office in particular, did not really know how to manage the downward spiral of British power in the world from Abadan, to Suez, and then to British withdrawal from east of Suez.

Lessons learned

What does Beck's volume add to the debate about how British policy was, or should have been, formulated in the 1960s and 1970s? Was the experience of the past considered to be a suitable form of training, or experience-building for civil servants? It is clear that the civil servants who were tasked with devising a strategy for the use of history in Whitehall were deeply divided amongst themselves on these subjects, and the reader's conclusions have to be somewhat negative about the value of the Whitehall exercise and the extent to which the efforts of those who were writing were seriously put to good use.

The arguments against 'bringing history in' were deployed at one time or another over this period. These included the time factor: those who had the influence did not have the time to do much background reading. Further, there was an understandable interpretation of each current event as being unique, and therefore not subject to the use of analogies or perhaps even an understanding of what had happened earlier, and a sense by bureaucrats that the roots of an issue were not relevant. Departmental rivalries and boundaries, the extent to which ministers could know about the work of historians, and the fact that there appears to have been very little constructive sharing of files speaks volumes about the domestic and bureaucratic contexts of policy-making and analysis. Of course, civil servants have also to be aware of the political agendas of their current elected bosses; this tension between the 'functional' approach and a 'political' approach to policy is impossible to avoid completely. The ministerial argument was a particularly interesting one—for historical research could indeed throw light on earlier political failures. But the lesson taken from this was that ministers should not be allowed to see what had been done by earlier administrations, although the civil servants of the Foreign Office got round this problem of informing their political bosses by arguing that there was a distinction between ministers reading old files, complete with the reflections and annotations of their political opponents, and being allowed to read secondary material generated from the files.

On the other hand, the arguments for continuity, for lessons to be learned, and for educating civil servants about the past were also advocated. There were civil servants who saw that 'what goes round, comes round', and that analogies abound, especially in foreign policy decision-making, but also in areas in which large amounts of public money are spent on high-profile projects. (One hopes that this book, and the sources that refer to the difficulties of funding for the Festival of Britain are placed, perhaps in abbreviated form, on the desks of those trying to manage and control expenditure on the current Olympics project.) The fact that civil servants were moved on to new tasks after only a few years meant that institutional memory was often weak, and therefore resources needed to be made available to bring civil servants with new responsibilities up to speed on the context of their work. The past can, at first sight, seem a very distant place, and some did see that this issue had to be addressed and overcome. Indeed, every scholar and teacher of international relations, politics, and contemporary history in higher education will have experienced working with students for whom the Cold War is now little more than a historical curiosity, yet even a cursory examination of Beck's major case study on Iran reveals how regional policies are not susceptible to the division of history into sharp Cold War, and post-Cold War categories. Indeed, events in April 2007 show the extent to which the aftermath of British policy to Iran in the 1950s still resonates in the region, while the Iraq *déba*cle cannot begin to be understood without knowledge of what has happened there in the past.

It is clear that what was hoped by those who wished to develop the ‘funding experience’ was that they would support and encourage greater ‘wisdom’, rather than simply more ‘background facts’: ‘wisdom’ in civil servants should mean genuine flexibility based upon knowledge that extends beyond the latest memorandum. This would mean that policy-making would neither be a predictable and unimaginative display of institutional path-dependency, nor would officials think that every crisis or episode was completely unique and without precedent (3).

The other big issues that Beck raises, albeit without very much discussion as they are beyond the specific remit of the book, are those that relate to how much the general public should be told about the workings of government; and the quantity of materials that should be made available to scholarly researchers. The framework of both these topics has changed with the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act. However, Beck shows that there are a number of general issues that preoccupied senior civil servants from the 1950s onwards and which are still germane.

On the issue of official histories, it is clear that the intention was as much to ‘set the record straight’ in the interests of the country, as to explore and admit to the mistakes and disasters that often befall policy-makers and their political bosses. This purpose underlay the wartime history project. For many within Whitehall, the purpose of official histories was also more pragmatic, and was intended to pre-empt demands for greater access to primary, archival sources, while generating an authoritative account of British policy that was not written from the records of other states. This explains in part why official histories have sometimes had a rough ride before they have been published (4). Yet it is clear that official histories do have a part to play in defining an authoritative, but relatively impartial, narrative on key issues. A scholar is chosen, vetted, and then funded. That scholar will have the right to see virtually all relevant documentation, but then can only publish after agreement within Whitehall. This can be seen as the gilded cage for the scholar who is writing on a theme chosen by the state (histories on MI5 and MI6 have been most recently commissioned) and who may then be censored by the state. On the other hand, it is an opportunity for a distinguished scholar to write at length on a subject of her or his expertise, using some material that is inaccessible to other scholars (5). So the problem seems essentially to be how a balance can be struck between allowing official historians full and unrestricted access to documents, and encouraging the oral testimony of those who were involved, while, at the same time, not allowing the historians to be too devastating in their critiques in a way that might undermine party politics, key individuals in Whitehall, or the interests of the government on the national or international stage. In practice, it would seem that full access is often not given, or not sought. Professor Alan Milward’s official history neither uses intelligence material (whether this would have added to his rich narrative thus remains unknown), nor interviews (although the passage of time since 1963 might make this a less important dimension, and of course the eagerly-awaited second volume may have such testimony) (6).

However, the pressure for releases continued apace. Indeed, ironically, it is those who have been in government, either as politicians or as civil servants, who now appear to present the greatest challenges to keeping knowledge about the workings of government under wraps. It was the access that Sir Anthony Eden had to records for his volume of memoirs, *Full Circle*, that stimulated the access debate in the 1960s (7). Indeed, the politician who took the greatest liberties in demanding and getting access to the primary record for his own historical work was, of course, Sir Winston Churchill, whose relationship with documents has been brilliantly charted by Professor David Reynolds (8). Today, we witness the skills of Sir Christopher Meyer, former UK ambassador to the US, in getting his memoir account to press; yet we also know of the failure of the UK ambassador to the UN at the time of the invasion of Iraq, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, to secure clearance for his publication on an issue of burning national and international importance (9).

It seems obvious that the trend to greater transparency will and must continue—unpleasant intimations about future restrictions upon the Freedom of Information Act notwithstanding. In a high-tech world, the capacity of governments to block access to information from abroad is relatively limited. Of course, the other way to promote secrecy is not to keep a proper paper trail. This may seem attractive, but it is actually dangerous, naturally for the citizens of a democracy, but also for civil servants themselves, who know that the accurate recording events can actually protect them too.

So the core arguments in favour of access to records remain persuasive: if we do not record our history, others will do it for us. The history of our public policy is our history, and its ownership should not be over-mediated by officials with their own complex agendas. The civil servants themselves need to remain one step ahead, and to know about the broader historical context in which they are operating, but the ‘funding experience’ was not very effective in the postwar years as senior civil servants failed to put to best pedagogical use the historical output of a succession of historians who were writing about important topics of enduring policy significance. The implications of his book for policy-makers and for the public remain as important today as they were in the decades that followed the Second World War.

Notes

1. C. O’Neill, *Britain’s Entry into the European Community: Report on the Negotiations of 1970–1972* (Frank Cass, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The list of internal histories remains classified, although *Abadan*, an internal history on Katyn, and Con O’Neill’s have been made public.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The ‘History and Policy’ website at <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/> [2] contains a number of very interesting and succinct examples of how a greater depth of historical understanding of the past can throw contemporary policy-making into a new and different light.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. It was a missed opportunity for Beck not to include a full list of the official histories in the book, although the Treasury Historical Memoranda are listed.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. The official history of Desmond Morton was, however, written from inside Whitehall by Gill Bennett, the then Chief Historian of the FCO, from 1995–2005: *Churchill’s Man of Mystery: Desmond Morton and the World of Intelligence* (Routledge, 2007).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. A. S. Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community: Volume I: The Rise and Fall of a National Strategy, 1945–1963* (Frank Cass, 2002).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Sir A. Eden, Earl of Avon, *Full Circle: the Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Sir Anthony Eden* (Cassell, 1960).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. D. Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill fighting and writing the Second World War* (Allen Lane, 2004).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. C. Meyer, *DC Confidential: the Controversial [sic] Memoirs of Britain’s Ambassador to the US at the Time of 9/11 and the Iraq War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004).[Back to \(9\)](#)

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