

Options for Britain II

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Background: Options for Britain (1996)

In 1995, a leading group of academics and policy experts came together to assess the key economic, social and constitutional policy options for Britain. The Conservative government had been in power for over 15 years, and thinkers on both left and right felt the need for an independent review of issues and options facing the country.

The project began with a three-day residential event at Nuffield College Oxford, with papers presented by leading academics, with two high profile discussants for each. Political representatives from both left (David Miliband) and right (David Willetts) were involved. Three further follow-up events were held, with extensive analysis and support provided by four Research Fellows. The conclusions were published in early 1996 as the acclaimed *Options for Britain: a strategic policy review* (Dartmouth, 1996).

A decade on, and the British political world is very different. Much of the analysis in *Options* has become accepted wisdom, and many of the policy proposals have become reality. But there is also a sense of *déjà vu*. The Labour government has been in power for nearly a decade, and – as in 1995 – a change of leadership is widely expected within 18 months to 2 years. Governments always find it difficult to refresh themselves in power, as the legacy of their own decisions build up. It is in these historical moments that outside thinking can have a decisive influence, helping to inform the public and key commentators, and to provide a source of ideas for incoming policy-makers to mine.

The current context

In many ways, policy environment is richer and better informed than that in 1995. The incoming government was keen on evidence-based policy. It created its own internal evidence-based think-tank (the Performance and Innovation Unit, which later became the Strategy Unit); encouraged policy research across Departments; built a measurement and target based approach to policy delivery; and substantially increased the funding and independence of National Statistics.

The ESRC – a co-funder of *Options I* - has also helped to enrich the policy environment, helping to correct the more inward looking tendencies of the Research Assessment Exercise. It has funded, for example, the Centre for Evidence-Based Policy, LSE's Centre for Social Exclusion, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies; it has encouraged academics to move into mainstream policy research, such as through its Public Services Programme; and it has encouraged a more active engagement of academics with Government.

But despite this increased activity, the gulf between the academic and research community and the Westminster policy-bubble remains large. This is not unique to the UK. Policy-makers in the heart of national governments often feel frustrated at the apparent lack of relevance or political savvy of independent 'experts', while external

experts find it difficult to identify which areas of policy are genuinely open to influence or where and when to intervene.

Options for Britain II

Funded by the ESRC and the Gatsby Foundation Options for Britain II seeks to provide an overarching review of the key economic, social and constitutional choices and challenges facing the UK in the coming decade, alongside an assessment of what has happened over the previous one. The methodological approach will run along similar lines to the previous Options for Britain project – marshalling the best expertise from the academic and policy research community to provide an independent and objective appraisal of our options as a country. As in 1995, the process and events will be open to representatives from the main political parties. Selected media commentators and figures from within government will also be invited. The project will run through 2008, so that outputs will be available in advance of the next general election.

Our first event will be a conference at Nuffield College on 27th-29th February, involving a series of presentations by leading academic, policy experts and politicians on a variety of policy areas.

Advisory Group Members

Nick Bosanquet, Robert Chote, Adam Coutts, Jane Green, David Halpern, Christopher Harvie, Paul Ingram, Tim Leunig, Helen Margetts, Iain McLean, Tariq Modood, Ben Page, Peter Riddell, Gerry Stoker, Bridget Taylor, Dafydd Trystan
