

A report card for the UK: Options for Britain II

How has Britain done in the last decade? How well has the Government performed? And what are the big choices that face us for the next decade?

These are the questions that were being asked at a conference in Oxford last week. It is the start of 'Options for Britain II' an ESRC and Gatsby funded project which aims to provide an independent and rigorous audit of the UK's economic, social and constitutional progress and future options. Using evidence which shows *what has worked – and what hasn't*, *why and for whom*, the project will set out key choices both for the electorate and a potential incoming government - regardless of its political complexion. Reflecting this breadth, the participants have been drawn from across the political spectrum – including those who must draft their Parties next manifestos.

Options for Britain II had an intellectual predecessor. 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 report was published in 1996, just over a year before the 1997 election. A decade on, and the British political world is very different. Much of the analysis in Options I has become accepted wisdom, and many of the policy proposals have become reality. But there is also a sense of *déjà vu* because the Labour government has been in power for nearly a decade. Governments always find it difficult to refresh themselves in power, as the legacy of their own decisions build up and 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.

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

However, despite this increased activity, the gulf between the academic and research community and the Westminster 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 seeks to fill this academic-policy void. Over two and a half days, many of the countries leading academics, policy experts, journalists and politicians gathered to discuss and identify what the key policy options for Britain are. These discussions will then be turned into chapters of a book which will identify the key

economic, social and constitutional choices for the coming decade, resulting in publication before the next general election

Options for Britain team.

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