What Use History?

Making the case for historical literacy in government.

Andrew Southam

'We are wasting billions of pounds a year because Whitehall blithely ignores history. We have economists, lawyers, scientists and statisticians galore in government. But professional historians? Not on your nelly.' So lamented the contemporary historian Anthony Seldon recently when making the case for professional historians to advise governments.

Similarly, professor of history at Princeton David Cannadine has urged every cabinet minister to appoint an advising historian, which he argues would have avoided former prime minister Liz Truss' disastrous September 'mini-budget'.

As has happened on occasion over the past 200 years, historians can contribute to government policy as mentors and advisers.

This development began when many historians moved into politics and government in the 19th century, as was the case for the historian, Whig politician and Paymaster-General Thomas Babington Macaulay, who in 1848 wrote *The History of England*.

Historians then took up advisory roles during the First World War. Take, for example, the ancient historian James Headlam-Morley, who led the German section of the Political Intelligence Department, became the historical adviser to the Foreign Office and helped draft the Versailles peace treaty at the 1919-20 Paris Peace Conference.

Essential: Hugh Trevor-Roper, 1983.

'Paris Peace Conference as a golden age for historians, whose large number there had arguably the greatest effect on the high table of politics than at any other time'

Liberal prime minister David Lloyd George was so worried by the Allies' early decision to award the German city of Danzig to Poland as a cause of future conflict that he personally gave this senior historian 'official authority' to resolve the problem. Headlam-Morley consequently influenced the prime minister's compromise policy of making Danzig a Free City.

This impact marked out the Paris Peace Conference as a golden age for historians, whose large number there had arguably the greatest effect on the high table of politics than at any other time.

Among their number was the Slavonic expert Robert Seton Watson, who affected government thinking towards the new Czechoslovakia and helped shape the new Yugoslavia. His inaugural lecture as professor of history at the University of London in November 1922 was entitled 'The Historian as a Political Force in Central Europe'.

A year before, the Tudor and constitutional expert Alfred Pollard was so concerned that an absence of historically educated men in government had caused the Great War that he helped found the Institute of Historical Research in 1921 to remedy the situation.

Then, during the Second World War, the government appointed the former ancient historian, and Chatham House's first director of studies, Arnold Toynbee as head of a new Foreign Research and Press Service to create a postwar peace. Unfortunately, subsequent Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe wrecked his department's ideas for a multi-national state of all the countries touching the Danube.

After the war, the diplomatic historian Charles Kingsley Webster helped devise and negotiate the new United Nations at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington. In April 1945 he revised the 'terrible' draft of the South African premier Jan Smuts to produce the Preamble to the United Nations Charter.

Margaret Thatcher notably used as advisors regius Oxford professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, whom she ennobled as Lord Dacre in 1979, and Oxford history professor Norman Stone, the irrepressible son of a Second World War fighter pilot killed in action, who went on to write the seminal First World War work on the eastern front, *Europe Transformed 1878-1919*, and become a noted Sunday Times columnist.

Trevor-Roper, Stone, historians Fritz Stern from Columbia University and Gordon Craig from Stanford University along with the journalist and historian Timothy Garton Ash persuaded Margaret Thatcher to 'be nice to the Germans' when helping her decide whether to support German reunification at the remarkable Chequers summit of March 1990.

Prime minister John Major in turn relied on Martin Gilbert, the official biographer of Winston Churchill, who became his Middle East adviser and speech writer, accompanying him on a tour of the region in 1995.

Gilbert later befriended prime minister Gordon Brown and was chosen as one of the

five experts on the independent Chilcot Enquiry investigating Britain's involvement in Iraq, although he died a year before its publication in 2015.

By the 1990s only the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Ministry of Defence had survived the cutbacks of the 1970s to retain historical sections. These services were used by New Labour when foreign secretary Robin Cook asked the FCO chief historian, Gill Bennett, to investigate his party's lingering suspicions of an 'establishment' plot to bring down Ramsay MacDonald's first Labour government in 1924.

Most historians accept that the electoral tide was flowing against Labour in the October 1924 general election. However, voter intentions were influenced partly by a 'red scare' caused by the *Daily Mail*'s publication of a letter, purportedly from the Soviet politician Grigori Zinoviev to the British Communist Party, stoking rebellion among the working classes.

Bennett's 1999 enquiry, which in 2018 became a book, *The Zinoviev Letter: The Conspiracy that Never Dies*, found the letter was probably forged, most likely by a Tsarist officer, although there are other possibilities including Stalin's attempt to discredit his rival Zinoviev. There was no establishment conspiracy, although there is good reason to believe that one or two rogue intelligence officers helped make the letter public.

Against the background of the recently signed Good Friday Agreement, the prime minister also assigned Bennett to work with the Irish government in 2000 and verify that the diaries of the diplomat Roger Casement – knighted for his services but then executed in 1916 for supporting Irish nationalism – were genuine and not the supposed forgeries of British intelligence.

Tony Blair occasionally used individual historians, such as the foreign policy and strategic studies expert Lawrence Freedman, who co-wrote his 1999 Chicago speech, 'The Doctrine of the International Community', which set out the criteria for military intervention. Sir Lawrence also became another member of the Chilcott enquiry.

More recently, former prime minister Boris Johnson commissioned professor of Irish history John Bew to advise the Downing Street policy unit and apply a 'grand design' to British defence ambitions. Liz Truss continued him in this role and, at the time of writing, Bew remains in Downing Street under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

Elsewhere, the History and Policy group under the directorship of the commonwealth expert Philip Murphy continues to connect a national and international network of academic historians with policy makers for advice and discussion on everything from the history of levelling up to the history of telecoms.

Professional historians can give governments not only context and a wider understanding, but a well of ideas with which to inform decisions and, at the very least, show them what to avoid.

Might governments heed the calls of Seldon and Cannadine to reap this wisdom on a regular basis? As Winston Churchill put it: 'Study History, study History, for therein lie all the secrets of statecraft.'

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Alternative Histories by Rob Murray

'And how long do you plan to hold my data?'