

Professor Virginia Berridge at the Arts and Humanities Discussion Group: Why do policymakers ignore history? Christopher Brown



*Professor Virginia Berridge.
Photo: Anne Koerber/LSHTM*

In recent years the role of history has been much in the minds of high-level policy makers. Whether in the shape of hands on Prime Ministerial shoulders, or the profound assessment of the 43rd President of the United States its judgement is self-evidently unknowable as "We'll all be dead".

Less well publicised has been the growing discussion within the Academy about broad historical trends in public policy and also the remit of professional

historical involvement in its formation and operation. It was on these themes that Professor Virginia Berridge of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine spoke at St Anne's during Trinity Term. Her own area of expertise is in public health policy and she is a leading figure in the History and Policy network which works for better public policy through an understanding of history.

By primarily using the example of smoking and health education policy, she admirably outlined the means by which historians have attempted to reframe and influence this issue. In highlighting the limited successes, she emphasised that whilst it is seldom possible to insulate policy judgements from political ones, complicated historical truths have also been overlooked as the attention of policy makers inevitably moves from issue to issue. The subsequent discussion focused on the perspective of historians as public intellectuals and the relative paucity of comparative research in meeting a bureaucratic and governmental need for knowledge. An immediate theme was the reluctance of historians to engage wholeheartedly with political parties for fear of compromising their future research and academic positions.

Tangential to this was the contrast between the success of historians in redefining their role in a professional context with the relative lack of impact in established policy communities. One suggested solution involved an extensive comparison of historical analogues to current policy topics. However, this did seem somewhat retrograde and at odds with developing analytical approaches within the scholarship. Nevertheless, 'real-world' problems rarely break down into the neat disciplinary boundaries so enamoured in academia. Without indulging in navel gazing solipsism, the consensus appeared to be that the onus remained on historians themselves to develop and adopt the methodology necessary for providing meaningful contributions to current and future policy debates.

