



## **Historians make History and influence the Present New Professorships in History & Policy**

**News Release - 4 October 2010**

King's College London and Cambridge University have appointed the first Professors of History and Policy in the UK. Alastair Reid takes up his role of Visiting Professor of History and Policy at King's College London and Simon Szreter has been appointed Professor of History and Public Policy in the Faculty of History at Cambridge.

They co-founded History & Policy in 2002, as an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history. H&P's new base at King's College London will expand its work disseminating high quality academic research into the public sphere and deepen its connections with policy makers and the media. Below Alastair and Simon explain the importance of connecting history and policy for society at large.

### **Why is history important for public policy?**

**SS:** It can provide a credible account of why institutions, problems and human relations exist in their current form. An historical perspective enables us to see how a current situation is only a snapshot of a dynamic unfolding process with a momentum that needs to be respected and understood. History can also provide detailed case studies of important solutions to analogous problems found in the past, providing imaginative resources with which to confront policy problems faced in the present. Looking to the past can be as effective as looking abroad for new policy ideas and solutions.

**AR:** Just as we routinely make use of our memories to guide our current actions, so knowledge of the past is clearly relevant to public policy. The question is whether that knowledge of the past will be properly historical, or whether we will be basing our decisions on false memories.

### **What is distinctive about being Professor of History and Policy compared to say, Professor of History or Professor of Public Policy?**

**AR:** It is distinctive because of making the link between the two fields of activity. Quite a few of our colleagues in history are still wary about making their research relevant to present-day problems, thinking that it will distract them from the independence they need to do research. And of course, most of those who work in the field of public policy may well make use of information about the past, but rarely have the approach to it that a historian would have. So this step is also a tribute to the H&P project, for having demonstrated that historical research can be introduced into public life without compromising academic standards, and that many of those active in policy making, the media and other academic disciplines welcome this and find it useful.

### **What is the difference between informing the present and understanding the past?**

**SS:** Understanding the past - or the attempt to do so - must always come first as an act of enquiry for an historian. The attempt to acquire that understanding is a necessary dialogue which ideally re-educates and changes our views of the relationship between past and present. Informing the present can then follow from the act of reporting this new perception of the past to others in an accessible way.

**AR:** What is specific about a historical understanding of the past is placing events and ideas into their own contexts rather than reading them through ours. This requires a unique combination of detachment and empathy which is the product of a long professional training in a distinctive practice of reading, thinking and original research.

### **To what extent are today's civil servants and politicians unaware of history?**

**AR:** Public debate is full of references to the past, but usually seen too narrowly and too functionally as leading in a simple, linear way to the present; or alternatively packaged up in legendary, romantic ways as part of mythical group identities.

### **What are the dangers of them NOT taking into account the lessons of history?**

**AR & SS:**

- Making simplistic assumptions about causes and effects.
- Ignoring important factors which do not suit their desired outcomes.
- Acting on semi-conscious notions of where we stand in the present in relation to other people's pasts and their cultures and sensitivities.
- Then being taken by surprise by the unintended consequences of their actions.

**SS:** Genuine historical understanding is alive to the dynamic and contingent relationship between past and present: that we are heavily influenced by it but that by seeking to actively understand it, we can gain some degree of informed emancipation. 'Ignoring' history is usually reproducing it or being strongly influenced by it in a way that is unsuspected. As Keynes said 'I do not know which makes a man more conservative - to know nothing but the present, or nothing but the past.' Without an historicist understanding of the dialogue between present and past politicians are likely to fall into over-valuing one or the other.

### **Notes to Editors**

1. [Alastair Reid](#) is a Fellow of [Girton College](#), Cambridge and Visiting Professor of History and Policy in the Centre for Contemporary British History at King's College London, where he manages the day-to-day work of History & Policy. A founder of H&P, he is also convenor, with Jim Moher, of the H&P [Trade Union Forum](#). Alastair has an active interest in new media, collaboration between institutions and communicating history to wider audiences. He is an expert on the history of trade unions and the Labour Party, with publications including *United We Stand. A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (Penguin 2005) and *The Tide of Democracy. Shipyard Workers and Social Relations in Britain, 1870-1950* (Manchester University Press 2010).
2. [Simon Szreter](#) is a Fellow of [St John's College](#) and Professor of History and Public Policy at the [Faculty of History, University of Cambridge](#). A founder of H&P, he edits new papers. Simon is an expert on demographic history with extensive experience of interdisciplinary work. His recent books include *Health and Wealth: Studies in History and People* (Rochester University Press 2005). Through his current work on civil registration Simon is involved with several interdisciplinary initiatives as well as policy work with the World Health Organisation. His forthcoming book *Sex before the Sexual Revolution Intimate Life in England 1918-1963* will be published by CUP later this month.
3. 6 October 2010 marks the arrival of History & Policy, with the Centre for Contemporary British History at King's, working within the Institute for Contemporary History. History & Policy's current work is supported by Arcadia and The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.
4. H&P has a network of 250 historians willing to engage with the media and policy makers. You can [sign up](#) for our monthly newsletter online or [follow us on Twitter](#). To request an interview with Professor Szreter or Professor Reid, please contact: **Fiona Holland - 0207 848 7047 / [fiona.holland@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:fiona.holland@kcl.ac.uk)**