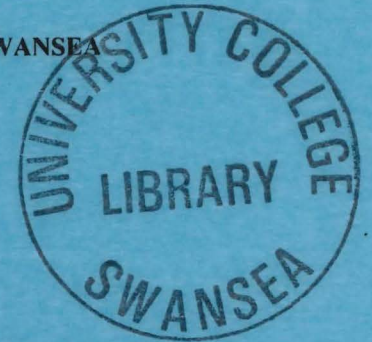UNIVERSITY OF WALES SWANSEA

"MAKING PUBLIC POLICY IN 19th CENTURY BRITAIN"

The Inaugural Lecture
of

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MAKING PUBLIC POLICY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

Vice Chancellor, friends, colleagues, ladies, and gentlemen

I told a friend recently that I was due to deliver my inaugural lecture. She looked aghast. 'But you've been at Swansea for more than two years, haven't you?', she said. She evidently thought this would be the first lecture I had given since coming to Swansea. Swiftly I assured her of my ceaseless industry, and that convention now dictated that a substantial time elapse between the arrival of a new professor and his or her being invited to deliver an inaugural lecture. I even recalled cases where what had been announced as inaugural lectures actually became valedictory lectures. There was a time, of course, when an inaugural lecture was precisely that, and the university could hear its newly-installed colleague for the first time. Reflecting on this, a suspicious thought occurred to me. Old-style inaugurals might be compared to road testing a gleaming new car, its engine purring sweetly and not emitting noxious emissions, upholstery immaculate, and its new owners (Council and Senate, perhaps) congratulating themselves that, in the present market, with the resources they had to hand, they could not have bought better. The new, deferred inaugural, perhaps has a quite different function, one might even speculate a Quality Assurance function. It is more like an MOT. The professor has been in post for more than two years, and roadworthiness now needs to be tested. What better emissions test than an inaugural lecture? A strict timetable for the evening will ensure that academic brakes are in good working order, and any early deterioration in roadworthiness should easily be detected by those strictest of

testers: one's own colleagues.

It is conventional on these occasions for the lecturer to recall the scholarly achievements of his or her predecessors in the chair. As I am the first holder of the Chair of Social History you may think I could or should forego that pleasurable obligation, but this is one of the happier traditions of our profession, and, like all traditions, can easily be adapted as circumstances require. I am, after all, a Professor in a Department whose professors have included Glanmor Williams, Alan Davies, Richard Shannon, Ralph Griffiths, Sydney Angelo, and Muriel Chamberlain. There are few Departments which could boast so distinguished a tradition. I am also acutely aware that the establishment of the Chair of Social History has its immediate origins in the tragic early death of David Jones, who held his personal Chair all too briefly. David's work has been celebrated in countless obituaries, and continues to shape the way in which the history of modern Wales and nineteenth-century Britain is understood. David's particular gift was his ability to evoke the lived history of the labouring classes. He had a remarkable sense of their voices, their culture, and the strategies through which they sought to achieve political mobilization. In what I still think was his finest book, *The Last Rising*, an utterly compelling and persuasive reconstruction of the Newport Rising of 1839, David also sketched a picture of the British state in the 1830s which surprised many of his readers but which, I think, captured the political instincts of Whig-Liberalism with remarkable historical intuition. I like to imagine that, although we employ rather different historical vocabularies, David would have recognised the picture of the 1830s which I will sketch this evening.

Most scholarship begins with finding problems when none previously had been thought

to exist. When I first started thinking about British state formation and public policy back in the early 1980s, there was a firmly entrenched interpretative orthodoxy. It was generally assumed that, before the 1830s, the domain of public policy was severely constricted and the principles by which policy was made were inchoate. This kind of reading meshed nicely with two powerful narratives, one a story of Britain's parliamentary history which openly celebrated the reform of parliament in the nineteenth century as an ideal path to modernity, and the other a commemoration of the rise of a centralist welfare state in the twentieth century as the ideal mechanism for harnessing state power as the guarantor of the well-being of society. Viewed from these essentially teleological perspectives, there was little to celebrate in the parliamentary politics and public policy of eighteenth-century Britain. What had emerged by the eighteenth century was a parliamentary state of modest ambition and questionable character. Policy was largely restricted to public finance, public order, and diplomatic relations. Britain's rise to world power in the eighteenth century was underpinned by a financial and fiscal revolution which enabled parliament to mobilize national resources for war on an hitherto unprecedented scale. No-one could doubt the power of the eighteenth-century British state, but it was a power exercised within defined and narrow boundaries. This was, in Sydney Checkland's memorable but highly misleading phrase a 'socially innocent state', in which what we would now term social policy was either absent or very imperfectly elaborated through a whole series of voluntaristic endeavours. In short, the state had yet to colonize British society.

Moreover the parliamentary system was not only deficient in its conception of a social agenda, it was also increasingly sclerotic. A limited franchise silenced the voices of new wealth, while a proliferating patchwork of official pensions and placemen, and cosy government

contractors, were the principal domestic beneficiaries of internal government expenditure. Viewed in this way, the state's social innocence was predicated, in part at least, on a particularly English kind of political vice. Radical critics had a term for it: they called this 'Old Corruption', and inveighed against a political system which paid lavish public pensions to the affluent and offered only niggardly weekly pensions to the poor. William Cobbett, the most prolific of all British journalists, bombarded his readers with myriad confirmations of the evil tendencies of Old Corruption.

On this reading, salvation came to Britain in the 1830s, with the advent of a Whig reforming administration. The Whig administrations of the 1830s cleansed the Augean stables by forcing through the 1832 Reform Act, which first purified the parliamentary system making it genuinely accountable to public opinion, and then proceeded to develop a coherent social agenda for the first time. The state now began to colonize society in wave after wave of reforming initiatives: factory reform in 1833, the first attempt to expand elementary education in the same year, the new Poor Law of 1834, a reform of local government and prisons in 1835, civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths a year later, and new police forces and a national postal system by the end of the decade. Almost overnight the state had lost its social innocence, and a new officialdom of inspectors and commissioners proclaimed a new gospel for redemption through public policy to a needy and now properly managed country.

This kind of analysis has been remarkably tenacious. Ideologically it was grounded in what the reformers of the early-nineteenth century had said. The critical agenda then conceived by political radicals, Benthamite reformers, and Whig political leaders, was nurtured in the mythologies of later nineteenth-century liberalism, and given expansive expression by early-

twentieth-century Fabianism. None did more to fix this reading of the history of public policy in Britain than Sidney and Beatrice Webb who, between 1906 and 1929, published a massive nine volume history of English local government from the Revolution (of 1688) to the reforms of the 1830s. This was a indictment of the so-called 'unreformed system' on a quite Byzantine scale. The sheer incoherence of social initiatives was catalogued in loving detail. Parliamentary statutes were, the Webbs insisted, at best imperfectly observed and at worst simply disregarded. There was no adequate machinery to make and implement policy in the localities, and no proper mechanisms existed for reining in the most potent adversary of good government: local diversity. The celebration of democratic centralism which lay at the heart of the Webbs' work was also a driving principle of the post-war Welfare State. And those who were inclined to regard the Welfare State as modelling the proper relationship between state and society were equally unlikely to find merit, still less method, in what passed for public-policy in eighteenth-century Britain.

Only in the 1980s did this teleological reading of the history of public policy in Britain start to be challenged. The crucial development was what might be termed the new history of the eighteenth century. Orthodox histories, whether they be Whiggish, Fabian, liberal, or Marxist had tended to caricature the eighteenth century in order to vindicate the nineteenth. Two strands of historical research converged in the 1980s which offered striking re-interpretations both of parliament and of public policy in eighteenth-century Britain. What emerged from the work of Paul Langford, John Brewer, John Phillips, Frank O'Gorman, Harry Dickinson, Joanna Innes and others was something close to an inversion of traditional accounts of eighteenth-century politics and political culture. Gone were dismissive references to the venality of eighteenth-century politics, to the gulf between parliament and public opinion, and to the sheer lack of governmental capacity in

eighteenth-century Britain. Gone, too, was the sneering dismissal of the eighteenth century's attempts to make and implement what we now call social policy. Although constructed on the basis of pre-modern, pre-democratic notions of representation, the British parliament was strikingly successful in representing the principal *interests* in British public life. Commerce, finance, religious Dissent, new wealth, all found expression in a parliament fashioned by and after a landed elite. Similarly it was a parliament which developed highly successful procedures for regulating and facilitating economic and social change. It not only created the legislative framework for a revolution in transportation, and successfully carried through a hugely ambitious financial revolution, parliament also developed a new framework of permissive legislation which allowed experiments in welfare provision, punishment, and the treatment of social deviance.

Taking new research on the eighteenth century seriously meant rewriting much of the history of the nineteenth century. One temptation, and one to which some historians of the eighteenth century fell pray, was that commonest of historians' conceits whereby one simply concluded that pivotal developments took place a century or so earlier. Thus the debates over poverty, police, social regulation, bureaucracy, and public health which were supposed to have erupted in the nineteenth century were now assumed to have been the currency of eighteenth-century discourse. Nevertheless, stubbornly, something did happen in the years after 1820. Public policy was remade, but not in the ways, nor for the reasons, that traditional historiography had supposed. What was needed was a more historically sensitive narrative of the transition from the eighteenth- to the nineteenth-century state, and a more contingent account of the changes of the 1830s and 1840s.

Here, paradoxically perhaps, the much more ambitious picture of eighteenth-century

policy offered the key, or at any rate a point of departure. It was, in fact, the massive transformation of policy in the eighteenth century which created the preconditions for the revolution in policy in the nineteenth. Let us examine what I want to call the welfare state of late eighteenth-century Britain. England and Wales had had a statutory poor law from 1597. In that year, each English parish became responsible for the maintenance of its poor, and was entitled to make a rate to support the poor. Continentals had a term for this English experiment in secular social welfare: they called it 'legal charity', a type of social provision unknown elsewhere in Europe until the French Revolution. A petty bureaucracy of local officials and politics emerged to run this system. By the late eighteenth century the fourteen thousand English parishes were run by a local governing class of around 400,000 parish officers and vestrymen, elected by local ratepayers and under the surveillance of the magistracy. The not always easy partnership between parish officers and magistrates helped fashion a hugely ambitious experiment in social regulation through the poor law system. By 1795 minimum family incomes were being prescribed by magistrates, with income supplements linked to food prices, and regular pensions paid to single parents, the infirm, and the elderly. In 1802-3 alone some 11% of the English and Welsh population received relief under the poor law, and contemporary estimates that more than half the population was supported by the poor law at some point in their life seems far from fanciful. By 1818 over 12% of public spending was devoted to welfare provision under the poor law.

The effect of the poor law, as political economists from Malthus, through Ricardo, to Nassau Senior pointed out, was to establish a system of wage regulation. An expansive welfare system, prescribing minimum incomes, inevitably did much to influence local wage levels, especially when it offered *de facto* wage subsidies to rural employers to keep on otherwise

underproductive labour. With patterns of labour migration also influenced by, and indeed regulated under, the poor law system, the late-eighteenth century was witnessing the interfusion of the welfare system and the labour market which is so characteristic of modern welfare states. Indeed we can begin to see the genesis of the modern debate over welfarism. Christian humanitarians, in the late-eighteenth century at least, were supportive of a generous welfare provision. The architects of the experiment in welfarism in the 1790s which became known as the 'Speenhamland System', men such as Sir Christopher Willoughby (Chairman of the Oxfordshire Quarter Sessions and a government advisor) or Thomas Gilbert, the M.P. who sponsored poor law and policing legislation from the 1760s to the 1780s, can all be located in a the context of a kind of late-Enlightenment Christian humanitarianism. Equally typical was the Rector of Barkham (Berkshire), Rev David Davies, whose *Case of the Labourers in Husbandry Stated and Defended* of 1795 was an elaborate enquiry into the state of the poor in his parish and neighbourhood, and a vindication of their practical need for, as well as moral entitlement to, poor relief. Some wanted to develop the system still further. Samuel Whitbread, M.P., for Bedfordshire and a leading Whig, advanced a scheme in 1807 which would have extended the welfare system to provide elementary education, regularize medical provision under the poor law, and gradually dismantled the embryonic system of indoor relief through workhouses. Not only did the poor law have its ideological defenders, they indubitably created something of the culture of expectation amongst the poor themselves. Investigator after investigator found the poor talking of 'our allowances' or something similar. The pervasiveness of the welfare system, in rural areas at least, was matched by a pervasiveness of life-cycle strategies premised on the availability of public relief.

The backlash against public welfare provision on this scale gathered pace in the early-

nineteenth century. As so often, the debate was superficially about economics but really about ideology or, if you prefer, morality. Political economists, from Adam Smith onwards, inveighed against the poor law as a grand exercise in economic illiteracy. By promoting the idea of minimum family incomes and labour market regulation, the poor law interposed itself between employer and employee, distorting market regulation of wages, and placing a premium on full employment at the expense of maximizing labour productivity. Thomas Robert Malthus, in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), made the moralizing assumptions of political economy unflinchingly explicit. In what many contemporaries regarded as a devastating critique both of the conception and operation of the poor law, Malthus argued that public welfare actually promoted the very social problems it purported to relieve. Generous poor relief, tied to family size, encouraged early marriage and improvident procreation. The poor law thus created the poor it then sustained through even higher levels of expenditure. Moreover, by pegging relief to trends in prices, the poor law served to increase demand for foodstuffs without acting to augment supply. The effect was as certain as it was dismal: fuelling demand would further inflate food prices, thus causing still more of the labouring class to fall into the safety net of the welfare system. Through the iron laws of supply and demand the dependent poor - the imprudent, the feckless, and the morally less deserving - thus undermined the position of the independent poor. The only solution, Malthus concluded, was the phased abolition of the poor laws.

This move to what became known as abolitionism appalled Malthus's critics. The poet and political essayist Robert Southey led the attack. Malthus was offering nothing less than 'the bible of the rich, the selfish, and the sensual'. The wealthy were emancipated by the remorseless laws of political economy from all social obligation, save that of assuring themselves that their own

efforts at wealth creation would be mediated through the market into some greater social good. By making clear the radical economic individualism of political economy, and by seeking to dismantle all mechanisms for the social redistribution of wealth, Southey believed political economy had revealed itself as a profoundly anti-social force. Where Southey led, a host of Tory and Radical critics would follow. Nevertheless Malthus was transforming the terms of debate, not just over poverty but over a whole range of social questions. Defenders of what we would now call welfarism were on the back foot. The abolitionists, soon abetted by none other than David Ricardo, that most remorselessly abstract of economic thinkers, came close to carrying the day. The poor were no longer constituted as proper objects of compassion but as a potentially uncontrollable threat to the well-being and stability of society as a whole. The market was cast as the principal agency of social improvement, and that which impeded the efficient operation of market mechanisms diminished the stock of national wealth and well-being. Moreover, given that most political economists (with the partial exception of Ricardo) were committed to a pre-industrial model of economic growth, not only was there no substantial increment of prosperity from which social policy might be funded, any over-generous system of social entitlement diminished the national stock of capital to a point where economic growth itself was imperilled. Thus although the remodelling of the poor law in 1834 did not take the fundamentalist form of abolition advocated in the creed of orthodox political economy, the sustained assault on welfarism launched by the political economists, coupled with their success in presenting political economy as the most technically sophisticated language of economic and social modernism, utterly transformed the ideological context in which public policy was made.

If we adjust our focus for a moment and examine attitudes towards punishment and

deviance, other aspects of the changing politics of public policy become clear. Later-eighteenth-century Britain witnessed perhaps the profoundest penal revolution in our history. Medieval and early-modern notions of punishment had centred on the body. Short of execution, penal and corrective strategies were corporal: whipping, branding, and other mortifications of the flesh. With the Enlightenment a new chapter in penology began. Enlightenment psychology opened the possibility of reforming the mind. From Montesquieu and Beccaria onwards, the orthodox Enlightenment position was that social habits were shaped by social contexts. Men were made vicious not born vicious; and it was social malformation which rendered men anti-social. It followed from this that punishment might be corrective. Thus the penitentiary was born, remaking the prison not as a place of confinement but as a place where punishment might be combined with social rehabilitation.

Between the 1770s and the 1820s virtually every English county rebuilt its prisons, and a new national penitentiary was built at Millbank. Simultaneously new prison regimes were developed, involving work discipline, education, religious instruction, and controlled modes of socialization, which were specifically designed to reform or 'recover' criminals. New prisons arose with architecturally designed systems of segregation to meet the authorities' classification of prisoners, and treadwheels were installed after 1810 in a attempt to introduce a more precise mechanism for regulating work discipline. What is remarkable about this penal revolution is that it was conceived and carried through largely by magistrates, who expanded the scope and resources of local government, in order to fund a grand penal experiment. Whatever fame penologists such as Jeremy Bentham might have enjoyed, and however much prison management might have become professionalized in the later nineteenth-century, the pioneers here were gentlemen

magistrates, with personal libraries comprising works of Enlightenment theory and correspondence files, through which the fruits and frustrations of penal experimentation were shared.

Like many social experiments, the penal experiment of the later-Hanoverian period fell victim to the unintended consequences of prison reform. New patterns of punishment themselves fostered new prisoners to punish. The penitentiary had been a crucial component in a new economy of deterrence. The early-eighteenth century had sought to deter through a massive extension of capital statutes. By the later eighteenth century there were some 220 separate capital statutes in Great Britain. This 'bloody code' was accompanied by relatively weak systems of policing. With the likelihood of detection low, deterrence rested on the sheer terror induced by fearful punishment. A reformatory prison system went hand-in-hand with a move to more regular policing and attempts to improve detection. Moreover, the disposition of magistrates to commit to trail and of juries to convict were both increased when the guilty were more likely to face imprisonment than execution or transportation. The predictable result was that indictments rose in the early-nineteenth century, and these apparently grand and capacious new prisons soon bulged with ever-larger numbers to be coerced into amendment of life.

Siren voices started to sound, not least because official statistics told a fearful story. The number of indictments to the higher courts rose by 388% between 1805 and 1834. Such statistics are difficult to read. To those who feared social destabilization of a Malthusian kind, the statistical narrative was frightening indeed. But it was now a matter of policy to move to punishment and correction through custodial sentences. Robert Peel, as home secretary between 1822 and 1827, substantially reduced the number of capital statutes and, in 1823, passed the first general Act to regulate prisons. Full prisons, it could be argued, was a consequence of policy rather

than a consequence of the failure of policy.

Any idea that capacious social policy emerged only in the nineteenth century must thus be abandoned. The hugely ambitious experiments in welfare provision and penal policy which emerged in later-eighteenth century Britain subvert the notion of a 'socially innocent state', although they do confirm that, until the 1830s, social policy was principally the responsibility of local rather than of central government. Moreover welfare and penal policies are not special cases: if we had looked at public health, social regulation, or policing public morality (or what the Hanoverians called 'the reformation of manners') similar stories could have been told of moves towards more pro-active, regulatory policies which were, in part at least, predicated on an assumption that the object of social policy was social improvement.

Viewed in this way, the 1830s did not witness the emergence of social policy, but rather the emergence of new strategies for making public policy. Moreover what happened in the 1830s did much to shape the modern British state and what passes for modernity in policy making. As with all revolutions in policy making (the Thatcher revolution of the 1980s is perhaps the most striking parallel) the revolution in policy making in the 1830s had a profoundly political agenda. The Whig/Liberal administration which assumed power in 1830 and reformed the parliamentary system in 1832 was committed to engineering a major shift in the balance of political power within the British state. In narrowly parliamentary terms their success is well known. In the forty-seven years before 1830 there had been only one year of non-Tory government; in the forty-four years after 1830 there were only five years of majority Tory government. What is less full appreciated is the Whigs' determination to remodel the political configuration of the state at all levels. The magistracy and lords lieutenancies, which governed the counties, and before 1834 had been virtual

Tory oligarchies, were forcibly opened to men of liberal opinions, new wealth, and Whig sympathizers. Simultaneously the power of local Tory elites was broken by transferring poor law administration in 1834 away from the non-elected magistracy to elected Boards of Poor Law Guardians. Establishing elected municipal corporations in 1835 similarly broke Tory power in the towns. The assault on the power and standing of an essentially Tory magistracy was a leitmotif of the reforms of the 1830s and, like the reforms of the 1980s, was predicated on a belief that policy was being made and enforced by the wrong people, in the wrong way, and in accordance with wrongheaded ideological assumptions.

There was, however, more to ideological transformation in the 1830s than the triumph of a reformist-minded Whig-Liberalism. Because much of the legislation of the 1830s seems to be premised on a pessimistic social analysis, it has long been assumed to be quintessentially Malthusian in character. The 1834 poor law diminished the social entitlements of the poor, and, like the Gaols Act of 1835 and the police reforms of 1835 and 1839, sought radically to augment the state's coercive resources. And yet, in conception and execution, public policy in the 1830s and after was anything but Malthusian in design. The reforms of the 1830s mark the beginning of Britain's long self-emancipation from the shadow of Malthusianism, and in this context we need carefully to distinguish Benthamite centralism from Malthusian pessimism. Malthus, you will recall, had argued that the iron laws of population and subsistence rendered a poor law, and welfarism more generally, a dangerous folly. Authentic Malthusian policy must entail abolition of the poor laws. Yet in 1834 the poor laws were not abolished but *reformed*. This represented the ultimate triumph of a different kind of analysis. Where Malthus aimed to return society to regulation by the market, the framers of the 1834 poor law were eager to subject society to ever-closer surveillance

by the state. Not, of course, and economically illiterate state, indeed a state which had fully embraced political economy as an analytical tool and a guide to, although not a sole determinant of, policy. Conceived in this way the 1834 poor law represented a decisive move towards an activist central state.

The key to the 1834 poor law, and to the workhouse system it instituted, was surveillance; and surveillance was, *par excellence*, a Benthamite concept. Jeremy Bentham's model prison, the 'panoptican', was an instrument for surveillance and a metaphor of the invasive state. In Bentham's panoptican design prison officers could observe all prisoners from a central observation point. Rows of cells radiated out from a central hub, and those confined not only lost their liberty but also their privacy. Bentham, too, was a product of the Enlightenment. Surveillance, even in the highly-pervasive form of the panoptican, was reformatory: a strategy for the forceable remarking of the mind. To its proponents at least, its objectives were benign, social, and progressive. Bentham's dying year was spent with a fierce disciple, Edwin Chadwick, acting as his amanuensis and repository of the true faith. And it was Chadwick who inspired and then wrote the key sections of the *Report from the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws* published in 1834. Chadwick reworked Bentham's panoptican ideal thoroughly and applied it to the poor. All relief was to be dispensed through workhouses, and workhouses were to be institutions of surveillance and reformation in the manner, and indeed after the architectural fashion, of prisons.

As a symbol, the poor law workhouse has become synonymous with cruelty, coercion, and Victorian cold-heartedness. The characteristic language of description is Dickensian, and the moral tone one of outrage. Generations of undergraduates, sharing these popular perceptions, have assured me that the workhouse was immoral. They were quite wrong. The workhouse, like the new

poor law which spawned it, were sternly moral in conception. They were inspired by a moral conception of poverty: that poverty was a 'less eligible' condition than that of the independent labourer, and that poverty had its roots in individual and familial dysfunction. Families fell into poverty as a result of idleness, profligacy, self-indulgence, and a failure to acquire social and labour-market skills. The *Report from the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws* was unflinching in avowing its moral tendency.

> We must make it evident that in the exercise of moral restraint, and by industry, sobriety, a peaceful demeanour, and economical management of their resources, and a far-sighted provision for the day of calamity from which few are exempt, [the labouring poor] may escape the misery into which imprudent marriages, insobriety, turbulence, infrugality and improvidence plunge men gifted by nature with every quality necessary to procure happiness.

The workhouse was the instrument for making good such social failings. The strategy of separating families within the workhouse was integral to re-equipping the family with the social and economic skills to make good. The justification for separating children from pauper parents was that those children were being failed by their parents. The new poor law represents a quite particular moral and ideological response to poverty. Whereas the Christian Humanism which informed the poor law experiments of the late-eighteenth century had assumed the poor were entitled to a liberal provision, and Malthusianism had inclined towards the view that the able-bodied poor had no social entitlement to poor relief, the framers of the 1834 poor law assumed that the poor were entitled to relief, but only on the strictest of moral and prudential conditions. To understand these strategies as anything other than competing moralities is to misunderstand the terms under which public

policies were (and are) made.

The moral articulations I have been hinting at are important, because Chadwick ultimately emerged as a passionate anti-Malthusian. This has not always been fully appreciated. Chadwick's language of social description seemed to echo Malthus's fears. In 1834 Chadwick presented an undisciplined, unregenerate, and unchecked pauperism as a threat to the economic and social wellbeing of the country as a whole. In his 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population*, perhaps the single most influential of nineteenth-century social enquiries, Chadwick conjured up a terrifying picture of industrial cities under seige from overcrowding, epidemic diseases, cholera, typhus, typhoid, and enervated by an 'annual slaughter' of population from avoidable diseases which exceeded that of the Battle of Waterloo. There was, to be sure, a fearfulness here which owed something to Malthus, but Chadwick's solutions were always quite different. Just as the threat of poverty could be checked by the workhouses and a central Poor Law Commission, so the problem of public heath could be addressed through arterial drainage, hydraulically-driven sewers, piped water, housing regulation, and a central Board of Public Health. By the 1840s, Britain had been through its Malthusian moment. It had considered whether or not faith should be placed in the state's receding from the broad domain of social policy, but now a new consensus was emerging which determined that the domain of the state and public policy was ultimately to be augmented dramatically.

If this was all that had happened to British public policy in the 1830s, the legacy would have been profound enough, but the decade also witnessed a transformation in the ways in which policy was made. One of the more enduring dimensions of this transformation was the rise of social statistics. Whatever the eighteenth-century was not, it was a statistically innocent state.

The Board of Trade was established in ?? 1694 and series of trade statistics were gathered, and a new statistically-informed mode of evaluating state power - political arithmetic - emerged. But the domain of official statistics in the eighteenth-century was narrow, and there was an enduring hostility to the official collection of social statistics. In 1753 a Bill to take a census of the population was defeated on the grounds that it represented too great an intrusion into social liberties. With the advent of a near-total war with France, and government's urgent need for a wide range of new kinds of information, something approaching a revolution in social statistics began. The first census of population was taken in 1801, and decennially thereafter, and the compiler of the first census, John Rickman, became the government's chief social statistician until 1839. The first census was followed in 1803 by a very full census of the poor, by the gathering of statistics of criminal indictments from 1805, and annual statistics on poor relief expenditure from 1813. The Board of Trade set up a statistical department in 1833, and from 1837 the civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths was compulsory. Now we did not need post-modernism to tell us that statistical series are narratives, that they tell a story, and social statistical data carry little inherent meaning. Meanings, notably political meanings, are imputed to statistical data by dominant languages of public debate. Nevertheless, there are, especially in political debate, hierarchies of knowledge, and ways of knowing are themselves the subject of profound contestation. By the 1830s statistics had established themselves as a particularly authoritative language for the narration and description of social problems. Official reports confidently reproduced poor relief statistics to establish unequivocally the 'progressiveness of the burden' of poverty. Robert Peel, as Home Secretary in 1829, used statistics on criminal committals to establish the case for a Metropolitan Police Force, as did Chadwick in 1839 to make the case for establishing County Constabulary

forces. Policy makers by the 1830s were operating in a climate where statistical knowledge carried a very particular authority. Statistical societies were established in Manchester in 1833 and London. in 1834 (the latter, of course, becoming the Royal Statistical Society in 1886). The London Statistical Society hailed the positivism of statistical science as 'real knowledge'; whilst G.R. Porter, of the Board of Trade, whose statistically-based *Progress of the Nation* (date) was highly influential, argued for a new science of social inquiry, based on statistics as 'well authenticated facts'. Increasingly non-quantitative modes of social inquiry, or conclusions which appeared to be falsifiable from *available* social statistics, were marginalized as the products of pre-modern modes of social discourse. The long-run consequence of what began in the 1830s is that debates on public policy have been enriched but over-determined by available social statistics.

The rise of statistics was part of a wider transformation of the manner in which official knowledge was constituted. Before the 1830s, public policy had been made through a long-evolving partnership between informal inquiry, local government, and parliamentary select committees. Although government could, and did, move for the appointment of select committees, most select committees on social questions were sponsored and chaired by backbenchers. This reflected the settled disposition of Hanoverian parliaments. The frontbench, dominated by career politicians, claimed primacy in financial, diplomatic, monetary policy; whilst experience of social policy predominated on the backbenches, where experience in local government and the leisure to gather information and expertise on a range of social questions were to be found. As late as 1817, Lord Castlereagh, the Leader of the House of Commons, refused to make poor law reform a government matter, because the government avowedly preferred to leave such questions to the men of experience in the localities and on the backbenches. Peel's time at the Home Office began the

process of change, taking penal policy, law reform, and policing into the Home Office's portfolio. Nevertheless if responsibility for policy was shifting, there was yet to be a major reconfiguration of the way in which policy was made. This came with the Whigs, or rather their Benthamite allies, in the 1830s, with the sudden emergence of the Royal Commission as the engine for making public policy.

Established by ministers acting under the executive authority of the crown, the royal commission gathered not merely interested M.Ps. but a much wider range of expertise - lawyers, academics, clerics, and increasingly public officials - to frame reports. It armed them with unprecedented powers of investigation, and encouraged them to gather information on an unprecedented scale. Thus the way to the 1834 poor law was paved by a Royal Commission which sat for two years, and amassed twelve massive folio volumes of evidence. What emerged was official knowledge claiming a quite novel authority. Under the sheer weight of evidence, and the authority which it implied, opposition was undermined, and the government invested with a new legitimacy in the making of public policy. The centralization of knowledge orchestrated through royal commissions from the 1830s onwards was crucial to the centralization of power. As John Stuart Mill put it in 1861, 'knowledge, to be most useful, must be centralized'.

Moreover this process promoted new kinds of knowledge, which came to disfranchise the old class of gentleman reformer and amateur policy maker. Official knowledge begot expertise. The Commissioners appointed to administer the poor law, like the inspectors appointed to oversee factories from 1833, prisons from 1835, education from 1839, and public health from 1848 used the authority of expertise to the full. Policy was increasingly made at the centre and executed in the localities. Experience, in which the gentlemen magistrates of Hanoverian England had grounded

their authority, was no match for the new official discourses. An age of policy specialization was beginning in which power would be exercised on quite different terms. Lord John Russell, justifying the new poor law, spoke of 'administration being placed in competent hands'. His allies well understood what this would entail. In constructing the poor law *Report* Chadwick believed he was shaping an official document which would 'expand the principles of a revolution in the largest branch of public administration'. No lesser an authority than John Stuart Mill, writing in 1830, hailed Chadwick's and the Whig's administrative revolution as 'in its general conception almost theoretically perfect'.

Thus the 1830s placed Britain on the trajectory which ensured that representative centralism would provide the essential context in which public policy was made. Power relations within parliament were renegotiated, and the relationship between state and society was being transformed. New languages, and hegemonic languages at that, we being improvised through which policy was to be evaluated, debated, and made. Because there is a clear line from what emerged in the 1830s and the patterns of policy making which have predominated in modern Britain, historians (and others) have mistaken a reformation in the making of public policy for the origins of social policy. Now were can see at least a little more clearly the extent to which one pattern of policy making - decentralized, diverse, and pluralistic - was displaced by another - more centralized, bureaucratized, and positivistic in its dominant modes of discourse. It would be difficult to exaggerate the significance of this transition to the making of modern Britain.

Flaubert, the author of the finest of all historical novels, once suggested that doing history was like drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful. I have been pondering this recently, not

least when staring at a blank screen and fearing that I might be developing an unwelcome bout of continence. Yet history as an academic discipline turns as remorselessly as Ixion's wheel. There is no settled landscape of the past, nothing of interpretative substance is closed in any definitive sense. Answers are at best provisional, and even then new answers raise new questions. In suggesting this, I am not suggesting that history is unusual among the human sciences. Most scholarship begins with finding problems when none before had been thought to exist. We habitually seek to open new domains of enquiry, frame new problems, challenge accepted orthodoxies, or - in that most disarmingly modest of phrases - simply try to 'raise a few questions'. Some try to elevate these scholarly dialectics to an art form in themselves. You will all know what I mean. The article starts with a familiar opening play: first citations from existing authorities carefully selected to expose frailties in argument without risking losing friends or opening oneself to a hostile review; then generous tributes to colleagues whose work has advanced our understanding, but not, of course, in quite the right way; and finally a carefully-placed moment of obeisance to one or more of the high priests of the discipline, hinting that he or she had designated this as an area urgently requiring more research. With these tropes new vistas are suddenly opened. Research findings are carefully marshalled, new theories elaborated, and a new orthodoxy is fashioned before the eyes of the wondering reader. All that remains for the conclusion is a recapitulation of the article's central themes, this time presented in such baroque grandeur that what began as a peripheral addition to knowledge has become a new foundational proposition of the discipline. Thus the academic article achieved its classical form. Recent developments have modified the strict sonata-form of this classicism. The proliferation of journals has enabled the wily author to diminish the gravity of an article's initial claims, not least because Heads of Department

will sleep so much more easily if three articles can be eked out where one previously might have sufficed. Then there is the new model footnote, carefully weaving publications from likely members of the next RAE panel into the scholarly apparatus of the article, however spurious (or dextrous) this linkage might be. Finally there is the matter of the title. Two variants work well, and both involve careful use of the colon. The first is the universalizing title disarmed by the remorselessly introspective subtitle, as in: 'The Crisis of Mental Measurement in the Modern West: Some Reflections on the Changing Status of the Mark of Beta-Alpha, with Special Reference to the University of Camford'. The second titular strategy is to suggest that one is engaged in a timeless quest for the profoundest of truths, as in: 'Taxing Moveable Property in the Herring Industry: New Light on an Old Problem'. By such means the scholarly article retains its unerring ability to promote self-sustaining academic production.

I trust none are offended by my parody. We ought, at the very least, to acknowledge that style and structure, as well as substance and scholarship, shape the modes of our writing. More than that, there is now something which is overly-formulaic in much academic writing, and the conventions of publishing are themselves now sustaining over-production in many areas of many disciplines. Nevertheless, my original point stands without the parody. Modern scholarship, indeed the very idea of the Academy, is premised on finding problems where none before had been deemed to exit. In that sense at least, we are all grateful inheritors of the legacy of the Enlightenment which finally empowered that most creative of forces, systematic scepticism. This emancipation of the mind was, of course, hard won, but the coming of age of the physical sciences in the seventeenth century and the social sciences in the eighteenth century created the intellectual and cultural spaces to begin to think what had previously been unthinkable. The consequences of

this cultural revolution in what was known and, more crucially, what might be known, were profound. In the western liberal tradition at least, truth was no longer policed but contested. More importantly, over time at least, a liberal political culture became intimately associated with relatively unconstrained patterns of thought and enquiry. In this freer intellectual climate the modern university was born.

This is not to suggest that patterns of knowledge and ways of knowing are unconstrained, nor that the idea university flourished independently of the imperatives of the state or society; it is simply to suggest that the domain of what was thinkable was massively extended. Nevertheless what has mattered is the capacity of universities to claim a largely autonomous cultural space within which communities of scholars, rather than cohorts of politicians or ecclesiastical authorities, determine priorities, terms of inquiry, and conventions for testing and presenting ideas, hypotheses, and research findings. For these reasons universities prided, and I suspect would still pride, autonomy from the state. They have preferred spending public money to accounting for the ways in which that public money is spent. They have been happier with the languages of self-regulation and self-assessment than with discourses demanding rigorous public accountability and external scrutiny. And for much of the last hundred years British universities had enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. There was a period - roughly from the 1870s to the 1970s - when British universities had been emancipated from religious tests and were still not yet subject to political tests. There was much that was wrong with universities in this period: access was hopelessly constrained, the stifling presumptions of the British class system were virtually systemic in much that passed for academic culture, and hierarchies of knowledge were too hastily elaborated and too strongly policed from within. Nevertheless as we look at the modern university sector

strapped for cash, reshaped by remorseless (and not always well informed) external assessment, and enduring a constant devaluing of the profession not simply in terms of what we are paid but in terms of the status and cultural influence we enjoy, we would do well not to sneer at a British university sector that had not yet discovered units of resource and formulaicly-driven mechanisms for quality assurance, or embarked on a barely modernized Fordism in order to produce research to meet externally-imposed production targets.

Now please don't get me wrong. As my colleagues would doubtless tell us, I am (or can be) the very model of the modern managerial academic. I can speak the new academic language like a native. I can sniff a new academic acronym several rooms down the corridor. I can conjure up a performance indicator at the drop of a hat, or even a half-finished academic paper. I might even, under pressure, confess to finding a certain enjoyment in all this. Above all, I accept that we must work with the tools that come to hand. The universities were deeply damaged in the early 1980s by their introspective lack of realism. Nevertheless realism must be purposeful. Our willingness to deploy the new languages of power in higher education should be conditional upon our ability to use new languages to advance or at the very least preserve the university as a place of free enquiry, constructive scepticism, and, above all, as a place where knowledge is freely contested. After all, the best, and perhaps the only authentic, form of quality control is the unquiet academic soul. The remorseless uncertainty which makes us question not just what colleagues are doing but what we ourselves have done. The moment when we cease that kind of sceptical questioning is the moment when orthodoxies petrify, and acquire authority by default. It is also the moment where disciplines like mine die: for history only has meaning, and should only be taught, when the meanings of the past are being contested in and for the present.