

Delivering Applied History to Policy-Makers: Ideas and Lessons

An interview with Gill Bennett, OBE, former Chief Historian of Britain’s Foreign Office

By Calder Walton, Assistant Director, Harvard Belfer Center’s Applied History Project

Harvard Kennedy School’s Applied History Project is an initiative with the express purpose of using history to inform policymaking. Inspired by Ernest May and Richard Neustadt’s book, *Thinking in Time*, it seeks to illuminate current policy challenges and choices by analyzing historical precedents, analogues, and their similarities and differences to the present. It addresses what Niall Ferguson calls the “history deficit” in contemporary policy-making in this country, “the United States of Amnesia”, and other countries. It seeks to stimulate imagination, find clues about what is likely to happen, suggest interventions, and assess probable consequences. It follows comments by General Jim Mattis, recent Secretary of Defense, who spoke at the Project’s Applied History Working Group in November 2019: “In preparing for decision-making, I know of nothing better than history”.

Since the Applied History Project’s establishment in 2015, it has rapidly grown momentum. It is designed as a “broad tent”: it encourages the use of history in any way to inform decision-making in government, business, and other sectors of society. The Project welcomes all perspectives on how history can be applied to inform current decision-making, including the view that history provides direct “lessons” for the present, as well the view that Applied History should be considered a way of providing decision-makers today with “historical sensibility”.

Equally important to *defining* Applied History is considering *how* it should be delivered to decision-makers. The “deliverables” for Applied Historians, like those of mainstream historians, are books, articles, op-eds, conferences, talks, as well as social media outreach. At least one academic peer-reviewed journal is now dedicated to Applied History. As well as these methods for transmitting Applied History to policy-makers, the Applied History Project suggests that it should be institutionalized as a central, normal, part of government. This could be achieved through existing historians in government, like the Office of the Historian at the US State Department, or by creating a new institution responsible for providing the executive branch with Applied History assessments. The two Directors of the Applied History Project, Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, have proposed the establishment of a Council of Historical Advisers within the executive branch, like the Council of Economic Advisers that advises the US president.

A model for how Applied Historians could give advice to decision-makers is the legal profession: legal advisers provide advice (about the legality of an action or inaction) but should not ever transgress into actually deciding policy—otherwise their advice risks being biased. Calder Walton, the Applied History Project’s Assistant Director, suggests this is a valuable formulation for integrating Applied History into policy-making in the executive branch. Intelligence agencies provide another similar model. Their function is to provide government decision-makers with information that gives them an advantage. However, to be effective, they need to be separated from policy-making: if the boundaries between them blur, intelligence agencies risk telling policy-makers simply what they want to hear. In summary, our proposal is that, like advice from economists, legal advisers, and intelligence agencies, Applied Historians can provide valuable

information to decision-makers, whose job is ultimately to balance all the sources of information and equities and decide policy. The buck will always stop with them.

With all these issues and ideas in mind, in October 2019, Walton was privileged to host Gillian Bennett, former Chief Historian of the British foreign office, to speak at Harvard's Belfer Center. Over the course of her forty-year career, Bennett was an historical adviser to successive British governments. She was, in all but name, an Applied Historian at the frontline of British policy-making. Walton asked Bennett the following questions:

Calder Walton: As Chief Historian of the British foreign office, what did your job involve?

Gill Bennett: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has had a dedicated cadre of professional historians embedded within it for over 100 years. Their main role is twofold: to produce the official documentary history of British foreign policy in the series *Documents on British Policy Overseas* (similar to *FRUS*); and to offer 'historical advice to ministers and senior officials'. The second role is deliberately vague; it can be extremely narrow or very wide. The Historians might be asked to provide background for a specific point in a planned speech or undertake a piece of in-depth research that takes months to complete. More commonly, we are asked to contribute a historical perspective to a wider piece of work, or to advise the department in the context of an anniversary of bilateral or multilateral significance. Current policy issues often feature a historical controversy in the background, and that is where the Historians can make an important contribution. The

current social media controversies about the reinterpretation of Second World War issues demonstrates the ongoing relevance of historical advice.

As Chief Historian my job was to lead all these strands of work, and obviously to front up the interaction with ministerial and other offices. On occasion I would represent the FCO, and sometimes the Government, in the media or at an international conference; in 1997 I even testified to the House of Representatives Banking Committee, on the issue of 'Nazi Gold'. I also had regular contact with the UK's intelligence agencies, and was sometimes asked to represent them in explaining issues publicly that were related to their history, particularly that of the Secret Intelligence Service whose archives are not transferred into the public domain. I was also personally involved with some archival issues, and with the early days of the UK's FOI regime, two areas now transferred to other departments.

CW: Looking back at your career, what impact did your historical advice have on British government decision-making?

GB: In the majority of cases my contribution would just have been a small part of the spectrum of advice on which decision-makers formulate policy. One will never know the weight that was attached to a piece of advice, but it is nevertheless important to offer it. But there have been some areas where historical input was particularly important and, at times, influential. One of these was the range of issues loosely termed 'Nazi Gold', concerned with the wartime actions and policies not just of Nazi Germany, but also of countries neutral during the Second World War, and with

the looting of both public and private property. During the later 1990s and early 2000s these issues had a live policy relevance drawing in departments across government, in the UK, US, and elsewhere.

Another area where I think historical advice made a difference is that of historical controversies, some of which have an enduring impact on policy. Some examples of this in which I have been closely involved are the Zinoviev Letter of 1924 (a political dirty tricks episode still resonant in British politics), the Katyn massacre of 1943 (responsibility a controversial issue until 1990), the intelligence contribution of the Polish government during World War Two and the role of the Irish nationalist Sir Roger Casement, hanged for treason in 1916. (Casement's role, and the question of his infamous 'Black Diaries', was relevant during the implementation of the 1998 Good Friday Irish agreement, and later). All these controversies retain historical resonance in current international relations, and I think it is fair to say that the advice I and my colleagues offered played a part in decision-making.

CW: What were some examples in your career where history was used well or poorly in policy-making?

GB: It is important to remember that historians can only inform and explain: we are not policy-makers. Government ministers have to consider a very wide range of factors in the formulation of policy, and it may be that the policy decided upon is not consonant with the historical advice. I feel, personally, that our work as historians in government means that we, of all officials, should understand this. It is the kind of thing that Neustadt and May wrote about so powerfully, and that

I tried to explore in my book *Six Moments of Crisis: Inside British Foreign Policy* (2013). So I do not think it is helpful to think about history being used well or poorly. But I will give one example. In the same context as Nazi Gold, I was asked to prepare a major report on whether property confiscated from residents of enemy countries during the Second World War had been returned to them at the end of hostilities. Though it was a complex question, the short answer is that yes, it had. But the government at the time, while thanking me for the report, wished to make a policy announcement inviting people who felt they might have lost out, to apply to a fund. I understood why the government wanted to do this politically, and had no problem with it: the important part was that my report was published, so the historical facts were out there.

CW: What did you find the most effective method of communicating history to policymakers?

GB: It is no good presenting a long memorandum or report (unless the policymakers commission one for publication). Advice needs to be targeted and timely: ministers want the equivalent of half a side of paper before lunchtime, typically. Over time one learns to do this, to provide perhaps a few bullet points indicating the historical bear-traps in a particular issue, or the key facts that policy-makers should bear in mind when taking decisions. Another part of this is for the Historians to establish a good relationship with key players; in the FCO context, this means for example with the Permanent Under Secretary and his Private Office, and with ministerial advisers. A good cross-Whitehall network is useful, too. All this helps in feeding in relevant historical advice when required, quickly and effectively. You have to be ready to respond rapidly, since crises can blow up quickly.

CW: Did you ever encounter difficulties in separating your historical advice from a government policy that you personally agreed or disagreed with?

GB: No. I am both a historian and a civil servant, and do not have a problem with that. We deal with the demands of ministerial policy, whatever the complexion of the government. When people ask me this question, I always say that it has never been my job to defend the decisions that governments have taken, but to explain them in the historical context. Again, understanding the complexities of decision-making helps with this: it is, as you say, Applied History, in the sense of applying historical rigor and knowledge from the inside, rather than from the outside looking in. I have always regarded this as a privilege and a pleasure, and at times very exciting.

CW: Are there any lessons from your experiences you that would like to share with our Project or other Applied Historians?

GB: A very long career, like mine, reinforces the understanding that no situation or problem in foreign policy (or any other policy area) ever repeats itself exactly. One important lesson is to avoid the false analogy (and all politicians can fall into that trap at times). Former British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd wrote that ignorance of history is foolishness, but the false analogy is more disastrous than the blank mind. Applied Historians can play an important role even if all they do is to try and steer policymakers away from sloppy analogies! The other lesson is that while policymaking is extremely complex, and of course influenced by political considerations, history is always important. Whatever happens, we Applied Historians must keep offering our knowledge

and advice, even if it seems to be falling on deaf ears. For in the end, evidence-based advice is the bedrock of good policymaking.