

Editorial - public policy at a crossroads?

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This special edition of People, Place and Policy Online takes a panoramic view of the likely future direction of public policy in the wake of the 2010 General Election. With the election hanging in the balance at the time of writing, this presents a critical juncture to consider the challenges facing the mainstream political parties across a range of policy domains.

In line with PPP Online's mandate to publish academic research concerned with mapping and shaping the contours of public policy, we invited experts to critically reflect on how policymakers should and, in all likelihood, will respond to contemporary challenges apparent within seven policy domains of immediate interest to PPP Online:

- labour markets
- anti-social behaviour and crime
- migration
- planning
- urban policy and regeneration
- the Third Sector
- the environment.

As we hoped, the seven contributors have responded to our call to comment on the urgent challenges of the day in different ways, from deconstructions of political discourses on anti-social behaviour (Millie) and immigration (Robinson) through to personal reflections on the implications for regeneration policy of extensive research undertaken by the author (Lawless). Others have analysed the competing positions of the main contenders of power to assess the likely impact of a change of government on the Third Sector (Wells, *et al*).

All seven commentaries validate the potential of social science to interrogate the nature and purpose of public policy. The contributors often share a common concern to expose the tensions at the heart of policy interventions. These range from the contradiction in Tory plans to minimise planning regulations in the face of likely opposition from their natural supporters (Goodchild), through to the future economic cost of failing to invest in environmental protections due to short-term budget concerns (Rotherham). Indeed, a

common thread running through a number of the pieces relates to how expenditure cuts to reduce the economic deficit threaten to neutralise or even undermine social reform. This could have severe consequences for the disadvantaged groups affected. By highlighting these tensions, the authors underline the capacity of applied social science to hold a mirror up to the complex and messy process of policy-making.

Few researchers engaged in policy-focused research expect their work to have a direct and immediate impact on the course of public policy. The pathways from academic research to the corridors of power are convoluted and, as some of the commentaries here highlight, often obstructed by dogma or populism. But the potency of applied research perhaps lies in its capacity to contribute to incremental knowledge that can eventually permeate the decision-making process. At the very least, it can trigger debates that lead to the reframing of flawed questions. As Fothergill concludes in his piece on policies on welfare-to-work, research can at least make the case for 'radical new thinking' about how we might address the issues of our time.