Britain in 2009

The state of the nation
Now I have clean water
Understanding water scarcity

It is estimated that 2.7 billion people face water scarcity by 2025. ESRC research reveals that water scarcity is often caused or exacerbated by socio-political processes, suggesting that, unless recognised, policy thinkers risk opting for solutions which may not reach those most affected. Research findings have contributed to the Human Development Report co-ordinated by the United Nations Development Programme.

making a difference to people’s lives

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The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK’s leading research and training agency addressing economic and social concerns.
Have you ever wondered…
“What’s that got to do with me?”

Discover how the big issues affect people and society at the ESRC Festival of Social Science 6-15 March 2009

The ESRC Festival of Social Science is an initiative from the Economic and Social Research Council, the UK’s leading independent research agency addressing economic and social concerns. To find out more and see the full programme of events across the UK, visit the website: www.esrcfestival.ac.uk
WELCOME TO Britain in 2009, the third annual magazine of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) that looks at life in the UK today. This publication examines the country from several angles, including the political, economic, scientific, educational and social. All of these aspects are illuminated by ESRC research, which places us in a unique position to provide evidence, as well as opinion, on the state of the nation.

Everyone reading these pages will know that the UK, like other nations around the world, is facing problematic economic times. In the Economy section, we reflect on the changing priorities which this new situation imposes on the country, and look at the contribution which new economic thinking from ESRC research can make.

We also show that even a potential recession is only one of the vital issues facing society today. As energy use is about human behaviour, the ESRC works closely with the other research councils to provide the knowledge we need to fight climate change and mitigate its effects. In the same spirit, we consider the possible effects of new technology on life in the UK. Examples here include several from the life sciences, including the growing potential of synthetic biology. We also provide the social science evidence for policy on vital issues such as health and obesity.

The ESRC’s research informs policy decisions in Whitehall and in the capitals of the devolved UK and the work we report on here is also affecting public services and the private sector directly. The research on knife crime is invaluable to people involved in policing and in the design of social services for the young. Our insights into financial decision-taking, such as the work on the connection between religious affiliation and how people save are useful to financial institutions. The research on how pension funds deal with the risk – from their point of view – that people will live too long will be of value to investors as well as to financial institutions.

Our researchers range from distinguished professors to people starting their academic career as PhD students. The ESRC funds major centres, programmes and initiatives to fulfil a national need for the highest quality research on specific topics such as ageing, population change and education. We also support researchers who make an excellent case for funding based on exciting and innovative ideas.

The research findings you will read about in the following pages show that our work is independent, interdisciplinary, original and makes a real difference. In the modern era, our search for impact and relevance means that an increasing amount of our research is carried out jointly with the other research councils, or by other funders such as the US National Science Foundation, government, industry or the non-profit sector. Innovative, interdisciplinary and international research will continue to be important to ESRC in the years to come.

We hope you enjoy Britain in 2009. We welcome your response via our editor at britain@esrc.ac.uk.

PROFESSOR IAN DIAMOND FBA AcSS, Chief Executive, Economic and Social Research Council
INSIDE BRITAIN IN 2009

ENVIRONMENT
9 FEATURE Sustainable living
   (see cover stories)
12 OPINION The climate change deal
NEWS
13 Are current levels of airborne pollution harmful to health?
14 A low-carbon electricity sector
15 Meat production and the environment
16 Running buses on giant compost heaps
16 Measuring progress towards carbon reduction in the UK
16 Biosecurity – more than badger culls
18 Better project management can save the planet
19 Young people worry about climate change but resist lifestyle change
20 Water use: habit or need?
20 Promoting greener pest controls

PUBLIC SERVICES
21 FEATURE Gangs, guns and knives
   (see cover stories)
24 OPINION Minimising health inequalities
NEWS
25 Going to a top university pays off
25 Never satisfied?
26 Private delivery of public services
26 Educational aspirations among ethnic minorities
27 Social care: the role of migrant workers
28 Getting into university
28 Using ‘geodemographics’ in public service delivery
29 Managing to improve public services
30 Why don’t people trust the NHS when it is getting better?

32 Train times
33 OPINION Choice in public services

ECONOMY
35 FEATURE The return of depression economics? (see cover stories)
38 OPINION Location, location, location
NEWS
39 Who plans for rainy days?
40 Annuities: managing the risks of uncertain mortality
40 The future of Britain’s food supply
42 Offshoring innovation
42 Hot and cold seasons in the housing market
43 Calculating the cost of a pension
44 OPINION The global financial crisis
46 OPINION Are the poor always with us?

POLITICS, RELIGION
AND SOCIETY
47 FEATURE Surveillance: social benefit or genuine menace?
50 OPINION Preaching to the pupils
NEWS
51 HIV and AIDS: how the church inspires hope in Zimbabwe
52 The House of Lords: the power and the glory
52 The army transformers
52 Can a city be tolerant by design?
54 “You cannot serve God and Mammon”
54 “Ask and ye shall receive…”
55 How women vote
56 Genetic disorders and inter-marrying
56 Aid chains
a Catholic Church study
57 Who becomes a violent extremist?
59 OPINION Celebrating NATO’s birthday?

BUSINESS
69 FEATURE The key to prosperity
72 OPINION Does shared capitalism work?
NEWS
73 Hidden innovation? Tesco’s USA
73 Corporate culture drives ‘radical innovation’
74 Evolution of the modern workplace
74 Young people in jobs without training
75 Migrant workers in London’s service sector
76 Weightlifting competitions
77 Management in the creative field
78 Childcare for dual-earner couples
78 Consumers and market competition
79 Learning processes
79 Dependable innovation in manufacturing
80 OPINION Modern management

SCIENCE
81 FEATURE Synthetic biology
84 OPINION The pharmaceutical industry
NEWS
85 Genomics and identity politics
86 When David meets Goliath
87 Left-handedness and cognitive development
88 Peer effects in science: evidence from the Nazis
88 Social sciences helping to solve animal and plant disease
88 Brave new world of psychiatric genetics
90 Questioning the Tree of Life
90 Talking in science classrooms
91 Autism and the MMR vaccine
92 OPINION First impressions

LIFESTYLES
93 FEATURE Changing relationships
NEWS
96 When parents choose their child’s gender
96 In times of doubt we still turn to mum and dad
96 Myth of the cultural elite
98 When I grow old I will wear purple – and join the Zimmers?
98 If I can’t read it, I can’t learn it…
99 Food: why can’t we control our appetites?
100 A multicultural atlas of London
100 Happiness: how being a man or a woman makes a difference
100 Still social after all these years
102 INTERVIEW Daniel Kahneman
104 OPINION Exercise, diet and obesity

MEDIA
105 FEATURE Kids online
108 OPINION Voice of Britain coming home
NEWS
109 Reporting on terrorism in the media
109 The phenomenon of internet gambling: problems and family-based solutions
110 The electronic games business
110 Privacy online: are we too trusting?
111 Tracing family history goes global
111 Sustainable lifestyles: tense online discussion
112 Political activism and the internet
112 How anti-racism advertising can backfire
113 OPINION An emerging global brain

COVER STORIES
9 SUSTAINABLE LIVING
Everywhere we turn we are being encouraged to live more sustainably, yet as a nation we are still not moving towards that goal. Sustainability can be a by-product of a lifestyle choice that may initially have nothing to do with environmental concerns.

21 GANGS, GUNS AND KNIVES
Police are striving to cope with the surge in youth violence. It is critical that frontline police officers work out how gangs work and find ways to prevent the violence, rather than just react to it.

35 THE RETURN OF DEPRESSION ECONOMICS?
We may see governments intervening much more in markets. “People paid extraordinarily high prices for houses because they felt they were trailing behind the Joneses. Brokers sold unsound mortgages because they had to keep up with other brokers.”
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