Dealing with the downturn

David Willetts: Following the evidence

Working mums: The challenge of modern motherhood

Striking back: The return of Britain’s trade unions
Welcome

to the third issue of Society Now, the Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) regular magazine highlighting our funded research and the impact of social science.

In the current economic downturn social sciences can contribute not only to understanding the causes of the financial crisis, but also the impact on society. Our cover feature highlights the effects of the recession on individuals, companies, charities and the global economy.

In other features we examine modern motherhoods, the role of trade unions, a new UK policy review, and interview shadow education secretary David Willetts about social science and politics.

The theme for this issue’s In Focus supplement is ‘People and science’, showing examples of how active engagement between the research community and the public benefits both parties. As Science Minister Lord Drayson says in the introduction, a public engaged in science is as much a question of democracy as it is of economy.

I hope you will find the magazine enjoyable and informative. We welcome feedback and ideas for content.

Editor, Arild Foss

In this issue...

REGULARS

3 News
15 Creating impacts
From research to results in society
16 Opinions
Religion in society; nuclear energy
18 The UK by Numbers: Health and Wellbeing
29 Information and Updates

PEOPLE & SCIENCE
The supplement highlights how science interacts with society, and how both research and the public can benefit from engaging with each other. Contents include an introduction from the Science Minister, case studies of research and public collaborations, stimulating public debate, and communicating science

Society Now IN FOCUS

FEATURES

10 When recession bites
The economic downturn is felt across society. What are the short and long term effects on people and sectors?

20 The millennium mummies
Social change has redefined the experience of motherhood. Today’s working mothers tread a difficult path between job demands and parental expectations

22 New options for Britain
The new global and domestic challenges arising from the last decade are reflected in a review examining key policy areas and options ahead

24 Trade unions – back in action?
For decades trade unions have been in decline, but now recession and job insecurity could herald a resurgence for the unions

26 Voices: The shadow and the evidence
Shadow education secretary David Willetts talks about social science, politics and the importance of robust evidence
ENVIRONMENTALLY AWARE consumers should worry as much about food preparation as food miles in their bid to limit environmental damage, suggests a three-year study of the impact of consuming fruit and vegetables produced locally and overseas. “Many people seem to believe that local food is best, whether for the environment, the community or in terms of the highest nutritional value,” states Professor Gareth Edwards-Jones. “But our research indicates that there are very few clear-cut answers, that local is not necessarily best and that our current obsession with food miles obscures the real picture on how the food we eat impacts the environment.”

Many consumers support local food because they relate food miles – the distance travelled by food, often from abroad – with environmental damage caused by the greenhouse gases emitted during transport. “Unfortunately, consumers often don’t realise that greenhouse gases (GHGs) are emitted from many more places within food systems than just trucks and planes,” Professor Edwards-Jones points out. “Fertiliser, pesticides, machinery and packaging all use energy. Indeed, our research suggests cooking and storage can be the heaviest consumers of energy. For example, almost half of the energy used during the UK potato’s life cycle of sowing, growing, harvesting, packaging, storage, transport and consumption is expended in the kitchen when the potato is boiled.”

The study assessed the potential environmental damage connected with the production and consumption of cabbage and broccoli, peas and beans, and lettuce and leafy salad in three regions of the UK as well as Spain, Kenya and Uganda. The research team used wide-ranging environmental information in order to produce a Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) of these vegetables covering growing, processing, retail and consumption. “Taking all this information together we find there is no simple answer to the question ‘is local best?’,” he explains. “Take lettuce, for example. During the winter Spanish lettuce is grown outside in the field. In the UK, lettuce is grown in the field in summer and in greenhouses in winter. The GHG emissions from UK greenhouses during the winter are greater than the emissions from driving the lettuce by truck from Spain to the UK. So buying Spanish lettuce in winter is better in terms of GHG emissions but worse in terms of sulphur dioxide emissions. “Even in the case of broccoli which is grown outside in both Spain and the UK,” he says, “the LCA analysis shows a large proportion of impact to the environment occurred during the storage, use and disposal of broccoli in the home. Even in terms of the nutritive quality of vegetables grown abroad as opposed to locally, the evidence is not clear cut. If we grew more local food, then in order to eat it out of season we would need to store it for long periods, which impacts on nutritive quality and is a heavy user of energy.”

The message is that evidence does not currently support a pro-local food policy to limit environmental damage. “At present the best advice we can offer those concerned about environmental damage is to buy seasonal food and go steady on the cooking,” he concludes. “Possibly the best place to start saving the world is in our own kitchens.”

i

This research project is part of the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme. Contact Professor Gareth Edwards-Jones, Bangor University Telephone 01248 383642 Email g.e.jones@bangor.ac.uk ESRC Grant Number RES-224-25-0044
An upsurge in UK rural activism

RURAL BRITAIN HAS witnessed a remarkable upsurge in political activity over the past decade. Much of this activity has depended on the mobilisation of grassroots activists, most of whom had no previous experience of political campaigning.

Research combining national-level investigation with four case studies in Cheshire, Exmoor and north Devon, mid-Wales and Suffolk finds clear evidence of the mobilisation of rural people in protest activity since 1997. A questionnaire sent to Countryside Alliance members in the four case study regions reveals that while only ten per cent had participated in a political demonstration or rally before 1997, three-quarters had taken part in the Liberty and Livelihood March, 22 per cent in demonstrations outside parliament during the passage of the Hunting Bill, and 17 per cent in protests at party conferences. Some 17 per cent said they had been involved in direct action such as blockades and pickets.

Findings suggest these new rural activists have a deep sense of belonging and emotional attachment to place, and they are provoked by anger, despair or concern at perceived threats to these places and the ways of life associated with them. Rural protests have also been characterised by the emergence of new organisations and networks which are capable of more rapid grassroots responses than established rural interest groups, such as the National Farmers’ Union and the Council for the Protection of Rural England.

At present, the impact of a decade of rural protest is unclear. “Arguably, few campaigns have been successful in achieving their objectives in changing policy or proposals,” says Dr Michael Woods. “But we do see clear evidence of change in the political culture in rural communities, with a greater readiness to protest and greater acceptance of confrontational tactics.”

Carers’ needs identified

NEW RESEARCH ON the quality of life and emotional experience of those suffering a spinal cord injury highlights the need to focus on care-givers too. Research reveals the intense anxiety felt by many care-givers, which is often related to their prolonged separation from the injured person while in hospital, and the dramatic shift from a lack of consultation in the injured person’s care to being a sole care-giver (with no training or preparation) post-discharge. Care-givers reported feelings of entrapment, despair and even ideas of suicide at times. The study suggests, first, that care-givers are more meaningfully integrated within the rehabilitation process. Second, the need for psycho-educational strategies to identify specific care-giver needs at regular intervals. Third, that care-givers receive an enhanced access to services within the community in order to buffer the effects of their care-giver burden. Finally, that effective screening tools are developed which can detect care-giver distress at an early stage.
Mixed fortunes for fair trade

FAIR TRADE GOODS FROM tea and coffee to fashion accessories now line the shelves of major UK supermarkets. The success of fair trade in the UK, however, is not matched in all European countries. A new study comparing Britain and Germany reveals that cultural differences play a key role in consumers’ enthusiasm for fair trade.

“Until fairly recently fair trade was limited to a relatively small group of like-minded Christian and left-wing activists buying through alternative retail channels such as church stalls, mail order and Oxfam shops”, Dr Matthias Varul points out. “Fair trade has left this niche in UK but much less so in Germany.”

In Britain expansion has been boosted by fair trade goods being separated in people’s minds from notions of buying into an alternative lifestyle. In Germany, not only are these notions more culturally entrenched but fair trade goods are largely more expensive than the alternatives.

In terms of boosting the sales of fair trade more widely, this study offers some suggestions. “The British case shows that it is necessary to ensure that consumers don’t feel that buying fair trade goods associates them with a milieu (for example, left-wing activists) whose culture they do not necessarily share otherwise,” Dr Varul explains. “But to really generalise fair trade consumption among all segments of the population, not just the middle class, may require an institutional/political approach in which, for example, bodies such as hospitals purchase fair trade.”

Researchers caution against campaigns that undermine one of the key objectives of fair trade: gaining respect and a sense of equality for fair trade producers. “Fair trade is as much about recognition and respect as it is about redistribution and justice,” he stresses. “Unless marketeers are very clear about this, their campaigns will be self-limiting and tie fair trade in consumers’ minds with ideas of charity for poor rural people who can only produce very simple agricultural products. In Britain in particular it’s important to be careful not to reactivate colonial imageries in commercial fair trade advertising,” he concludes.

IN BRIEF

BADGER TB CONTROVERSY
Both badgers and cattle carry, and are infected by, bovine tuberculosis (bTB), but controversy surrounds the question of how the disease is transmitted and in which direction. This debate brings together a wide range of scientists as well as non-scientific stakeholders such as farmers. Researchers will investigate people’s understanding of this debate and how this influences their position on the key issues.
ESRC grant number: RES-229-27-0007

CHINESE GLOBAL BRANDS
Previous research on China’s industrialisation has typically focused on its shift from basic manufacturing to more technologically advanced production. This project considers another way in which Chinese firms can capture value in the global economy: branding. One aim is to assess the attainment of branding capabilities in Chinese firms by examining its most exported sectors – garments and home appliances.
ESRC grant number: RES-061-25-0355

FOCUS ON EYE CONTACT
Eye contact is among the most important signals in human social interaction but there is no agreement on the mechanism and development of the ‘eye contact effect’. The aim of this study is to build a coherent model of this. Findings will help develop user-friendly devices that can stimulate face-to-face communication. These may be particularly useful for infants and children with special needs.
ESRC grant number: RES-063-27-0207
IN BRIEF

PROMOTING AN OLDER WORKFORCE
The increasing age of the UK workforce presents major challenges for government, occupational health services, employers, workers and their families. The research will address the wide-ranging issues associated with later life working and will develop interventions to promote the health, productivity and quality of working life for older people.

ESRC Grant Number RES-353-25-0006

KEEPING TABS ON TAX EVASION
Tax evasion is possibly the most widespread economic crime. Despite its importance, little is known about the extent of tax evasion and the impact of enforcement policies such as audit strategies and penalties. Based on the experimental findings from a unique field project, this study will explore the deterrence effect of tax audits as well as the total extent of evasion.

ESRC Grant Number RES-000-22-3241

COSTLY INTERRUPTIONS
Estimates of how often people are interrupted during office work range from every ten to every three minutes. People commonly continue with another two tasks before they return to the one they had left prior to the interruption. Researchers will explore whether people can be trained to deal with interruptions more effectively. Findings will be of special interest to those who work in places prone to interruption.

ESRC Grant Number RES-000-22-3111

The right message for charitable appeals

DISASTER APPEALS THAT emphasise the helplessness of the victims may be counterproductive, says a new study of donations following humanitarian disasters. Dr Hanna Zagefka points out that portraying disaster victims as passive and helpless, in an attempt to underscore their neediness, is currently common practice in many appeals. “Our research into why people donate more generously towards some humanitarian disasters rather than others indicates, contrary to expectations perhaps, that people are more willing to donate in order to help victims who are perceived to help themselves,” Dr Zagefka explains. “Hence campaigns may be more effective when they seek to represent the victims as proactive and self-helping.”

Findings from this study of humanitarian disasters, including the 2004 tsunami and the ongoing conflict in Darfur, offer charities a range of practical insights into the optimum design of their donation appeals. “We find that people are somewhat more willing to donate to victims of disasters with natural causes (for example, a tsunami) rather than to disaster with man-made causes such as war,” Dr Zagefka points out. “This is because people automatically and immediately tend to infer that the victims in conflict situations such as Darfur must be to blame for their plight. Obviously this is often not correct, with civilians tending to suffer during a war without having caused or contributed to the conflict.”

To maximise the effect of appeals in the case of such disasters, researchers suggest that charities carefully consider how the crisis is portrayed. “Highlighting the natural causes that contribute to such a disaster is key,” she stresses. “For example, in Darfur the crisis is partly man-made as a result of armed conflict but is also naturally caused as a result of drought.”

People, she continues, sometimes have a propensity to blame victims for their situation. This tendency is explained by the psychological theory of ‘just world belief’. “What we find is that people want to believe that the world is just and that everyone gets what they deserve,” Dr Zagefka explains. “In other words, that bad things don’t happen to good people. This allows us to protect the illusion that we are masters of our own destiny and can avoid misfortune through our own efforts.”

To counteract this bias researchers suggest that charities place emphasis on the innocence and impartiality of victims and their lack of responsibility for the situation in which they find themselves.

The study also indicates that people consider their country’s relations with that of the affected country when they make donations. People are less willing to donate if the victim country’s regime is perceived to be an enemy, rather than an ally. “This is interesting because often disaster victims don’t actually support the regime,” she points out. “Nonetheless donors are biased against them. Ideally campaigns should highlight positive relations between the donor’s and victim’s countries. If this is not possible they should provide information that helps donors see the diversity of groups within that country (for example, civilians vs government) and their differing sentiments towards the donor’s country.”

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ESRC Grant Number RES-000-22-1817
MORE THAN 90 per cent of teachers have experienced some form of violence at school, whether verbal or physical abuse, non-verbal intimidation or threats, according to a new survey of 275 secondary school teachers from schools in the south of England. Just over half of these teachers admitted their perceptions of teaching had altered as a consequence of these incidents and some 44 per cent had considered leaving the profession while 14 per cent actually changed schools as a result.

“Violence can be an issue in some schools,” states Dr Denise Martin, “but our research indicates that teachers’ experience of violence is rather more complex than the bald statistics suggest.” Teachers admitted a variety of responses to how they felt about their experiences, ranging from anger, self-doubt and embarrassment to actual fear. On the other hand, some claimed little impact.

“One key finding is that the teachers least affected by their experience were in the main those who felt supported in what they were doing,” Dr Martin explains. “So if the school had clear behavioural policies in place and dealt quickly and effectively with the incident then the teachers tended to view the incident more as a nuisance than as violence.” Indeed some 60 per cent of teachers reported that the support they received was good or adequate.

Over 30 per cent of teachers, however, felt that support from management, colleagues and outside agencies was poor or mixed. These teachers were also most likely to have a negative experience of violence.

Overall, the study suggests that violence is currently a difficult topic for both teachers and schools. “Teachers may not be forthcoming about their real experiences because they don’t want to appear unprofessional or give their pupils a bad reputation,” she explains. “Also, schools are under pressure to achieve targets and this is not conducive to transparency about behavioural problems or, perhaps, to schools applying their existing behavioural policies with consistency. There is a real fear about gaining a reputation as a school with behavioural problems.”

Researchers suggest a much larger scale study is now required to clarify the extent of the problem and appropriate solutions. “Although this study was small in scale it provides some clear pointers,” Dr Martin concludes. “Violence is an issue but not across the board. Teachers stressed the importance of schools equally and consistently applying behavioural policies in ways that make them feel supported. Teachers also highlighted the value of better ongoing training in behaviour management throughout their careers.”

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Hands up for communication

WHEN IT COMES to getting your message across, it’s most definitely not what you say but the way that you say it, according to a new study. When we talk we use spontaneous gestures with our hands known as ‘imagistic gestures’. Research reveals that when people speak they unconsciously encode important parts of the message they are trying to convey into the imagistic gestures they use. Overall, these gestures are significantly more likely to encode high importance information than medium or low importance information. The study further reveals that we gain even more information from messages delivered face-to-face than in video presentations. Eye tracking studies show that listeners pick up the critical information contained in very small imagistic gestures even when these appear just outside their peripheral vision.

“Our findings clearly indicate that the gestures that accompany speech are selective and focused, capturing core aspects of the message to encode and transmit to another human being,” Professor Geoffrey Beattie points out. “At a practical level this suggests that we may be able to make a whole range of communications – therapeutic, political and commercial — more effective by placing core parts of a message into imagistic gestures.”

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Grandparents are an influence for good

GRANDPARENTS PLAY A largely positive role in the lives of their grandchildren, and the policy implications of this important role deserves serious consideration. A new study led by Professor Ann Buchanan and Dr Eirini Flouri concludes that while the role of grandparents is almost invisible in UK family policy, debate is now required on both the legal rights of grandparents and ways to promote grandparent-grandchild relations.

Based on a survey of 1,596 children (aged 11-16) in schools across England and Wales and in-depth interviews with 40 young people, researchers discovered surprising levels of grandparental involvement with their grandchildren. More than 80 per cent of children surveyed saw their grandparents on a regular basis. Almost one-third of maternal grandmothers provided regular caretaking for their grandchildren while another 40 per cent provided occasional caretaking. Most grandparents provided regular financial support or other assistance. In addition, there was considerable involvement from grandparents in sharing young people’s interests and activities, and discussing future plans.

“Finding that a grandparent’s involvement is significantly associated with better adjusted adolescents difficulties, and fewer peer problems. Under the law in England and Wales grandparents have no legal rights over grandchildren. A study in 2001 of 44 families in divorce proceedings concluded that grandparent-grandchild contact post-divorce did not have an ‘essential purpose or fundamental importance’ which could justify an enhanced legal status for grandparents. “Our study challenges that conclusion,” suggests Professor Buchanan. “We find that grandparent involvement buffers the effects of adverse life events, but particularly so amongst adolescents from non-intact families.”

These findings make a significant contribution to current debate concerning the limited legal rights that grandparents have when cases involving their grandchildren come to court, and the lack of visitation rights following parental divorce. Moreover, outside the legal sphere, new efforts to promote grandparent-grandchild relations now appear warranted – for example, grandparent/parent school open days to discuss the curriculum, or the allocation of sheltered housing for older people with a priority for those with grandchildren in the area. “Overall the considerable involvement of grandparents in their grandchildren’s lives and the positive association of this involvement on child wellbeing suggests that the role of grandparents needs greater recognition,” Professor Buchanan concludes. “Given that in most families grandparents are a force for good, there needs to be further discussion on how this ‘good’ can be maximised. Part of this discussion may include the role that grandparents should have under the family justice system.”

Findings from this study reveal that a grandparent’s involvement is significantly associated with better adjusted adolescents.

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‘Experts’ fare badly on face recognition

SOME PEOPLE ARE better at recognising faces than others. New research shows, however, that these people are not necessarily the professionals for whom accurate face recognition is increasingly important.

Using a new image database, researchers tested 300 observers on matching unfamiliar and familiar faces, object matching and memory tasks. Findings reveal that some participants performed poorly at almost all face recognition tasks. Interestingly, these poor face recognisers had no awareness of their limitations when asked about their abilities.

Researchers then tested experts involved in face processing professionally, including police officers with varying levels of seniority and experience. All, however, had had standard police training in identification. “Using a number of different tests and comparing the performance of police officers to that of students, we find that police officers perform no better than students,” Professor Mike Burton states. “Despite this, the confidence of police officers in their performance is normally reliably higher than that of students. This dissociation between perception and performance is of considerable importance in the legal process.”

Nor were other expert face processors including passport officers any more accurate at face recognition tests than the students and police officers. “We did find a small group of experts from a forensic facial imaging bureau who performed better than other participants we studied,” says Professor Burton. Their superiority appears to be based on fine-grain analysis of facial areas not normally used in recognising an identity, such as a person’s ears. Early attempts to teach this strategy to non-experts did not result in improved performance, but researchers are hopeful their expertise can feed into better future training procedures.

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Trust is too costly

HOW MUCH DO we trust other people? A new study finds that people whose financial situation is comfortable are more likely to trust strangers, as are homeowners. Trustworthiness is less likely if a person’s financial situation is perceived by them as ‘just getting by’ or difficult. Taken together these findings suggest that trust in strangers and trustworthiness towards them are ‘luxuries’ some people cannot ‘afford’.

Researchers further found that

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GREEN EXERCISE

Physical activity has been shown to improve both physiological and psychological wellbeing. Yet how do different environments influence health? Exercise in the natural environment (‘green exercise’) could be a powerful tool to help fight the growing incidence of cardiovascular disease and may help supplement expensive drug-based therapies.

This study will consider whether the protection of green spaces is imperative to people’s wellbeing. ESRC Grant Number RES-004-27-0009

WIRED FOR OLD AGE

Older people who are confident and empowered users of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) stand to gain significant benefits for the full duration of their old age, if their use of ICT can be sustained. The Sus-IT research project will investigate how to support older people to sustain usage of ICT in the face of changes in their capabilities and circumstances as they grow older. ESRC Grant Number RES-064-27-0019

FERTILITY TOURISM

Over 40 million women worldwide are seeking fertility treatment, and those in developed countries are increasingly travelling outside their home states in their quest for a child. Through an analysis of this ‘fertility tourism’, this project aims to deepen understanding of transnational aspects of assisted reproduction, and provide recommendations for user support and regulatory policy. ESRC Grant Number RES-000-22-3390

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When recession bites

The UK is in the midst of an economic downturn which could be the worst since the Second World War, according to some analysts. Every part of society is hit by recession – so how are we going to cope with this new reality? Our panel of commentators looks behind the headlines.

LOSING WORK, LOSING HEALTH
Professor Mel Bartley, Director of the ESRC International Centre for Life Course Studies in Society and Health

RESEARCH FINDINGS HIGHLIGHT the adverse effect of recession and unemployment on overall health. During the 1980s many studies were carried out on unemployment and health, indicating that unemployment increased the risk of psychological disorders such as depression. However, any relationship between unemployment and physical health was much more difficult to assess. There seemed to be a tendency for unemployment to hit hardest those who already had some degree of health problems. In fact, for some people in heavy and arduous jobs, a spell of unemployment made them feel that their health had actually improved.

A higher mortality risk was found in men who were unemployed at the time of the 1971 and 1981 censuses of England and Wales, but it was difficult to decide whether this was due to the types of jobs they had previously been doing, such as mining and shipbuilding, which involved many health hazards.

As more time has passed, researchers have been able to collect more information on the longer term outcomes for those who experienced unemployment in the major recessions of the 1980s and 1990s. These were years when studies of people over long periods of their life course became more popular, so we are now in a position to be able to tell far more about the longer term experiences of the people who were unemployed in previous recessions.

For example, men who were unemployed as far back as 1971 still had a higher risk of limiting long-term illness by 1991, 20 years later. Conversely, secure employment among healthy adult men and women of all ages in the 1990s greatly reduced the risk that they would develop a work-limiting illness and increased the likelihood of recovery. Employment security between the ages of 26 and 30 in the late 1990s was even more important for the mental health of people who had experienced some psychological problems than in those who had not. All these studies allowed for the fact that people at high risk of unemployment tended to have been doing more hazardous types of jobs.

Looking at the experience of unemployment in a life course perspective also allows us to see whether it damages people’s prospects for social and economic achievements. Taking a group of young men who came from advantaged backgrounds, had high intelligence and did well at school, it was found that those who were unemployed for a year or more during the 1980s recession were quite a lot less likely to be high earners, in a professional job or own their own homes by 1991 than those who were more steadily employed. Health behaviours such as smoking, drinking and exercise were also worse in those who had been unemployed, even though at the time of measurement they were back in work again.

According to these findings, health and wellbeing effects of long-term unemployment can be felt for several years – and potentially a long time after the recession itself has ended.
SAVING THE ECONOMY — AND THE PLANET
Dr Ralf Martin, Research Fellow at the ESRC Centre for Economic Performance

AMIDST ECONOMIES HEADING for recession, climate change campaigners keep reminding us that the damage done by the credit crunch is nothing compared to the ‘environmental credit crunch’. Worse, there is the worry that the current banking crisis might increase our chances of heading for environmental disaster, because governments and companies are now less inclined to implement the necessary regulatory framework and make the required investments.

At the same time this might be a good opportunity to address climate change and other environmental problems. The credit crunch clearly shows how failures that build up slowly over a long time are extremely costly when addressed too late, but relatively cheap when dealt with early on, and that this sometimes requires drastic policy measures on the basis of uncertain forecasts. The parallels with climate change are obvious.

The current political willingness to implement drastic ‘all it takes’ policy measures could be used to set us on the right track for addressing climate change. Plans for fiscal or spending stimuli could come in the form of much-needed investments towards a carbon free economy. A good idea for Europe, for example, would be to invest in an integrated super conducting electricity grid, distributing solar energy from northern Africa and offshore wind energy from northern Scotland and other places. Another suggestion is subsidies for improving the energy efficiency of the housing stock. This would directly help homeowners struggling with mortgage payments as well as the hard-hit building industry.

The key concern is how we will pay for such spending packages and whether we are heading for a ‘tax bombshell’ in the near future. An environmental tax reform would avoid this by shifting taxes from wages to pollution in a revenue neutral way. This would make vastly more economic sense and in economic equilibrium must be good for jobs and bad for pollution – the ideal policy to boost employment without requiring any extra borrowing.

The standard argument against pollution taxes is that poorer people spend a larger fraction of their income on energy and thereby pollution. However, they also receive an even larger fraction of their income in wages, which would increase with reduced wage taxes and lead to more disposable income. This extra spending power would provide an additional boost for the economy.

With the current recession taking a merciless grip on the nation, we are faced with rocketing numbers of repossessions and rising council house waiting lists

AFFORDING A HOME
Adam Sampson, Chief Executive of housing charity Shelter

WITHIN DAYS OF becoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown made a long-term commitment to build three million homes by 2020 and backed this up with direct investment of over £8 billion in new affordable homes between 2008 and 2011. It was a watershed moment that gave hope to the 1.6 million households stuck on lengthy council house waiting lists and to potential first-time buyers trying to get a foot on the housing ladder. Families throughout the country could rest assured that they would one day be able to have a ‘safe home’ that they could call their own.

Fast-forward 18 months and that promise looks like a distant memory. With the current recession taking a merciless grip on the nation, we are faced with rocketing numbers of repossessions, rising council house waiting lists, tens of thousands trapped in temporary accommodation and would-be first-time buyers being forced to put their plans on hold. With unemployment at an all-time high and homeowners struggling to pay their housing costs, public services have found themselves in a position of permanent fire-fighting in order to meet the demands of people who have been hit hard by the downturn.

Housing associations, themselves affected by the lack of available finance, have been unable to kick-start developments because they cannot borrow cash. And the private house building sector has all but shut up shop in the last year, throwing tens of thousands out of work. As thousands of construction workers face the dole queue, it’s fair to say the future of house building looks bleak.

If ministers don’t act now to save the industry, it could take ten years for house building in
WHEN RECESSION BITES

Britain to recover, sentencing this country to decades of housing decline. In the long term, the three million new homes target will remain a distant dream and millions of families will be condemned to the misery of overcrowding, homelessness or sacrificing their family needs in a desperate effort to get onto the housing ladder. The result will also bring the inevitable repetition of boom and bust that has caused the very problems we are grappling with now.

What is needed now is an ambitious programme of investment in affordable housing. This would not only ensure the continuing supply of new homes, but would also prop up a house building industry that is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, and take advantage of now depressed land and building prices. Moreover, if the government was willing to relax the restrictions on local authority borrowing against the value of existing housing stock, a ready source of money could be easily available.

Every day at Shelter we encounter the depressing reality of the government’s failure to respond to the current housing crisis. Every day, more and more people facing the threat of repossession or in a desperate search for a house get in touch with us, seeking help and advice. Ruthless lenders seeking to repossess homes, coupled with sky-high fuel and housing costs, has made it impossible for many families and individuals to aspire to having a safe, sound and permanent home.

In tough times, we need a ‘new deal for housing’ to deliver these much needed homes. The recession has created a different environment that needs a new approach, and the government must take decisive leadership now in order to ensure that we build sufficient numbers of homes over the long term to meet the housing need, which is growing at an alarming rate.

THE CHALLENGE FOR CHARITIES
Barbara Stocking, Chief Executive of Oxfam

THERE IS NO doubt that 2009 looks set to be a challenging year for the charitable sector. In the current economic climate, many non-governmental organisations are likely to see a decline in income, and to worry whether the willingness of the public to give to overseas causes may shrink as they face their own difficulties at home.

At Oxfam we have not yet seen a significant fall in our overall income. But nor are we seeing the growth we were originally anticipating. Our shops are doing well – with profitability up a little on last year – but at the same time we are beginning to see a downturn in the donations of clothing and other second-hand goods, which will challenge our ability to maintain a healthy turnover. Meanwhile, the weak pound means we have less purchasing power overseas, so even if our income stays the same, we will be able to buy less in many of the countries in which we work until the exchange rate improves.

It is important for Oxfam, and organisations like us, to challenge ourselves to work smarter and better.

Credit Crunch medieval style

IT IS EASY to believe that the current global banking crisis is an unprecedented event, depending on a set of unique circumstances nobody could have foreseen. But Dr Adrian Bell, Professor Chris Brooks and Dr Tony Moore at the University of Reading’s ICMA Centre have documented a remarkably similar credit crunch – in medieval times.

In the 1280s, Italian merchant societies, the forerunners of today’s investment banks, were awash with money managed on behalf of the pope and the English king, as well as deposits from wealthy individuals. In the early 1290s, however, much of this liquidity was drained from the system as the pope withdrew much of his money and the French king levied a huge tax on the Italian merchants. The final straw was the unexpected outbreak of war between England and France in 1294. Edward I, the king of England, called on his bankers (the Ricciardi of Lucca) to
For these reasons, and as part of the usual budget setting process, we began last year to revise our plans in light of new expectations. As a charity that relies on the generous donations of the public, we constantly strive to be as cost-effective and accountable as possible. But now more than ever it is important for Oxfam, and organisations like us, to take a close look at our operations, and to challenge ourselves to work smarter and better.

Our first priority is to minimise the impact of any cost-cutting on our programmes in developing countries (as well as on our UK poverty programme). This is all the more important as the evidence grows that the global poor look set to pay a high price for the financial turmoil they had no hand in causing.

Latest estimates from the World Bank suggest that 40 million more people in developing countries will be pushed into poverty in 2009 as a result of the financial crisis. This comes in the wake of a global food crisis that pushed 100 million more people into hunger last year. Add to this the impacts of climate change, including less predictable crop cycles and more frequent extreme weather events, along with the suffering in ongoing crises in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe and Gaza, and it is clear there can be no worse time to turn our backs on the world’s poorest. On the contrary, we need to redouble our efforts to help the millions living in poverty around the world, and to maintain pressure on governments to do the same.

If Oxfam can afford to feel cautiously optimistic about our chances of weathering the storm, then it is because of the overwhelming support we receive from the public for our work. When the Disasters Emergency Committee launched an appeal at the end of last year to help victims of conflict in eastern Congo, nearly £10 million was raised. It is a figure which suggests that, while economic circumstances may change, the human response of the British public to dire need does not wane.

IN THE SHORT term, as is becoming very clear, the rest of the world is going to share the economic pain of the financial meltdown and recession that started in the United States and Britain. We are all so very interconnected. The collapse of demand in the US and other large developed economies will reduce demand in every exporting country around the globe. China’s slowdown will hit countries from which it buys goods. Commodity prices have fallen back to low levels. Oil, for example, is now around $40 to $50 a barrel instead of $140 as it was in July 2008. These falls cut the incomes of countries that are heavily dependent on oil exports – Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran among them.

One of the encouraging features of the last decade has been the outbreak of convergence. Large chunks of the less developed world are catching up at last; China and India growing by leaps and bounds. While everything everywhere may slow down, these countries are likely to become much more prominent in the global economy in the coming years.

China, where now around half the national income is saved, can, potentially, massively increase demand. It has a huge current account surplus, multi-trillion-dollar foreign exchange reserves, low public debt and deficits, and a banking industry that has not (so far as one knows) invested heavily in the exotic products that have brought down the West. There is huge scope for more capital investment with high returns. Indeed, China will need to expand domestic demand to make up for falling exports. In the short term, the recession is forcing a correction of the ‘global imbalances’ that have worried many commentators. In the longer term, it will
Innovating in downturns
Helen Miller, Research Economist, Institute for Fiscal Studies

Innovation is an important contributor to long-term growth in an economy. Should we be concerned that as the UK and the rest of the world enter a recession, firms will be investing less in developing and adopting new products and processes, and that long-term growth will suffer?

The answer to this question is not obvious. During a recession the cost of investing in innovative activities is lower than in times of expansion. Labour and other inputs will be less in demand, so are likely to be cheaper. In addition, when a firm is facing slack demand for its product, internal resources are likely to be underutilised, so undertaking innovative activities will be less costly.

Take the following example: consider a retail firm that could implement a new computer system to monitor stock flow on the shop floor. A recession may be the best time to implement this technology. If the firm needs to shut the store to install the new equipment, and to divert staff from normal sales activities to undertake training, this will be less costly when the firm is selling less. Managers will have more time to reorganise current practices, and workers are likely to be more willing to accept change when their job security is less certain. It may also be a good time to lay off some workers and to hire new workers with more appropriate skills. As well as adopting new technologies or processes, firms may use this time to invest in research and development with the aim of inventing new products. This process of investment may be reinforced by businesses that feel the threat of bankruptcy and need to seek productivity gains.

The notion that downturns are not necessarily bad for innovation fits into the ‘pitstop’ view of recessions as being a period when firms can take the time and resources to reorganise their activities and invest in new ideas. Recessions may therefore spur activities which enhance long run growth. However, many firms may find that although they would like to invest in innovative activities, they do not have the finances to do so.

The ESRC funds a wide range of economic research, from the performance of financial markets, world economy and corporate governance to economics modelling, the dynamics of business competition and spatial differences in UK economic growth. More info on ESRC-funded research centres and programmes is available at http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/EconomicResearch
Creating impact

ESRC social scientists produce world-class research, engaging in high-impact science. Our research and work plays a vital role in society, creating impact that is used in a wide range of areas, from healthcare and education to poverty and environment, in the UK and beyond.

**KEEPING CHILDREN SAFER**
One third of 9-19 year-old technology users have received unwanted sexual or unpleasant comments online or by text message. However, research into children’s use of the internet and mobile phone technology has made a significant contribution to increasing online security for young people. This has helped to contribute to user policies and guidance for global companies such as Microsoft and Vodafone, as well as policymakers, the police, government departments including the Home Office, children’s charities and parenting groups.

**TEACHING CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**
‘Texthelp Systems Limited’ teamed up with academics who psychologically evaluated the main software product market in order to develop software for students with learning disabilities. Through this collaboration, ‘Texthelp’ is now one of the first in the field with this form of software, providing constructive and easily applicable learning.

**MAKING I.T. WORK FOR HEALTHCARE**
A study examining information technology in the NHS has enhanced working practice and improved patient experience. As a result, a new community clinical library at Barnet Hospital has adopted new ways of storage and identification to increase data efficiency. The findings have been shared with clinical, academic and business organisations, including NHS Trusts, university departments, The Royal College of Surgeons, the Royal Society of Medicine, Google and Microsoft.

**BENEFITING FROM THE LONG VIEW**
The decision to place health warnings on cigarette packets is just one example of the contribution that longitudinal research has made to effective policymaking. Policymakers can now make more informed decisions on key policy issues such as health, poverty and crime due to a unique set of ESRC-funded datasets including the British Household Panel Survey, the National Child Development Study and the British Cohort Study. These resources track large samples of people over their lifetime providing a long-term perspective on a range of pressing social and economic concerns.

**DEVELOPING ENERGY POLICY**
Research has suggested that regeneration schemes and new-build developments should be required to use renewable electricity and heat technologies. A study has looked at the benefits of community-based energy programmes and how they can be supported, leading to the development of an online database of community renewable energy projects.

**IMPROVING PUBLIC TRANSPORT**
Research has also demonstrated the importance of having public engagement in system design. Electronic displays of waiting times are being introduced at bus stops across the UK, but a study has highlighted problems with information display and maintenance responsibilities. Passengers were unaware of the benefits of the system as they did not fully understand the information that was made available to them. The Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform has received vital feedback on passengers’ perceptions of the scheme which can be used to improve future products.
OPINION DAVID VOAS

God in a secular society

Integrating religious traditions in a secular world is necessary, argues Professor David Voas. There is space for both churchgoing and chocolate eggs at Easter.

“Serious devotion makes us worried. Religion seems disturbing when it is forced on our attention.”

EASTER IS CONFUSING. The connection between resurrection, bunnies, coloured eggs and chocolate is a mystery to tax the most inventive theologian. People reinterpret tradition to meet their needs, and religion is not exempt. Whether a holiday is Christmas, Diwali or Eid, the celebration takes on a life of its own, to the frustration of puritans.

Sometimes religious tradition does not go quietly, and then society is faced with a problem. We want everyone to be free to practise as they prefer, consistent with the same liberties for others – but we worry about religion becoming a source of social division. Having survived the religious turmoil of the 17th century, followed by a gradual easing of hostility towards Catholics, it is difficult to treat religion as wholly private, however, because religion is essentially social in character. The problem for policymakers is not simply how to manage differences between people, but how to cope with competing communal interests and rival sources of authority.

A modern society can deal with religion in one of three ways: incorporation, confinement or conciliation. Religious organisations are incorporated into society when they are given official status. They may be established as the state church, like the Church of England, or recognised as institutional sponsors of various services. In Belgium and the Netherlands, for example, society was for many years organised into religions can sometimes seem threatening.

Commitment to pluralism means that we should try to integrate and not to separate. Official incorporation of religion into public life does not help to achieve this goal, nor would a policy of accommodation that encouraged separate education or other forms of segregation. Conversely, the danger of a rigorous policy of confinement is not merely that it may inhibit free expression of belief, but also that it may be counter-productive. Assimilation, if it occurs, cannot be forced.

I am thus inclined to favour the messy policy of conciliation between religion and secular society. Easter can be about churchgoing, chocolate eggs, both, or neither.

Professor David Voas, University of Manchester, specialises in religious change in modern societies. As part of the ESRC-funded Religion and Society Research Programme he is developing an online centre for British data on religion. Email: voas@manchester.ac.uk Web: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/images/uploads/Dr_D_Voas.doc
The UK is a world leader in science. As a nation we have given the world some of the greatest scientific breakthroughs, such as the World Wide Web and the discovery of DNA. But we cannot maintain our standing as a scientific nation without a general public that is knowledgeable about science, confident about debating its role in our society, and involved in decisions about its general application. This is as much a question of democracy as it is of economy.

This spring the government will publish its science and society strategy, following the extensive consultation carried out last year. It will contain a range of proposals to increase and improve dialogue between scientists and ordinary people; to enable the media, business and the science community to work together more effectively on publicising emerging scientific issues; to drive up the quality of science teaching and the take-up of careers in science among young people.

The challenge for me and my department is that we have to attract more people into science, both as a career and as participants in an important area of our national life. We need to communicate the message that more of the jobs of the future will be science-based or informed by new and groundbreaking research. One of my first actions as Science Minister was to call for a media campaign highlighting the importance of science to our everyday lives. Gordon Brown launched the Science: So What? campaign on 28 January 2009. The campaign is making the link between science and the public heroes who are able to succeed because of the science behind them – for example, Britain’s world-beating Olympic cycling team or Formula One World Champion Lewis Hamilton.

But it is also making clear that not only does science touch and improve all our lives, it is an activity which creates new jobs and business opportunities throughout the UK every year. An example is in areas like low carbon technology, which grew by 43 per cent last year and is now worth an estimated $100 billion. Science: So What? explains that science will help us to deal with the great challenges of our times: climate change, the ageing process, clean energy production and global security.

I am sure that readers of Society Now will welcome this initiative and will share our ambitions for a scientifically literate and engaged British public. I therefore urge you to consider what contribution you might make to reinforcing UK science. A good place to start is the Science: So What? campaign at http://sciencesowhat.direct.gov.uk

NOT ONLY DOES SCIENCE TOUCH AND IMPROVE OUR LIVES, IT CREATES NEW JOBS AND BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES
THE WORK Of social scientists would be much harder without input from the public. The views and experiences of ordinary people shape our understanding of society. But how do you persuade people to share personal details or engage teenagers on ‘worthy’ issues such as crime prevention? Traditional approaches include lectures and focus groups. Yet work funded by the ESRC shows more innovative methods can bring groundbreaking results.

This is highlighted in two recent projects exploring how the public engages in contemporary issues. One has investigated how to gather information on the impact of siblings on our lives, especially in childhood and later life. The other has focused on novel ways of engaging young people in complex issues relating to crime and health. Both projects were highlighted at the ESRC Festival of Social Science 2008, but have since been developed further.

The work on sibling relationships was carried out by Dr Bill Bytheway and Professor Joanna Bornat at the Open University and Professor Rosalind Edwards and Dr Susie Weller at London South Bank University. Both sets of researchers have projects investigating the different ends of the life course as part of the ESRC’s Timescapes study.

Schools, libraries and other venues were used to advertise the project. People were invited to submit basic personal details about themselves and their siblings on a postcard or online. Nearly 800 people aged from three to 90 filled in the postcard, including those in countries such as the US. Responses ranged from minimal information to pages of fascinating detail highlighting concerns such as the role siblings play in caring for elderly parents.

Since then the project has progressed by linking up with the BBC’s ‘Memoryshare’ website. This will enable people to ‘bank’ sibling memories in the BBC collection. This collaboration launches on 6 March as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science 2009. Researchers are also reworking their own website to showcase the sibling stories they have collected. This archiving will benefit social scientists who can use this resource for further research.

London’s Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood is working with the researchers to run a ‘family’ weekend of activities based around sibling relationships.

Professor Edwards, director of the Families and Social Capital Research Group, says the ‘overwhelming’ response to the project is proof of its public appeal and impact. She says: “We feel we’ve been really successful in engaging the public, and touched a nerve about the importance of people’s relationships with their sisters and brothers, not just in childhood but right through into old age. The device of sending us a postcard, and the ease of doing this through our website in particular, really captured people’s interest and stimulated their thinking about research.”
PICTURING CRIME

How do we get young people to engage in debate about complex issues such as crime and public health? This is the theme of a project by Mark Cutter from the International School for Communities, Rights and Inclusion at the University of Central Lancashire, and colleague Professor Alan Gillies.

They focused on giving young people an ‘interactive’ experience of the criminal justice system by considering the path of an offender from arrest to trial to punishment. This was done through a novel concept called ‘conference in pictures’ – an interactive approach where an artist draws images based on live responses from participants. These pictures or cartoons are then made into a gallery of images for use at later events. Drugs, surveillance and the death penalty were some of the controversial issues that cropped up. Another was how young people viewed punishments such as Antisocial Behaviour Orders (ASBO), a flagship government tool for combating crime. What came across clearly was that youths often regard them as a badge of honour, not a mark of shame. So the artist ‘translated’ this finding into a picture of a boy with an ASBO bragging to another about how ‘cool’ he is to have one. The University of Central Lancashire team repeated the exercise for schools where students took part in an activity day exploring the reality of crime and punishment. It has also been used for community groups. The views and responses have all been collated through ‘conference in pictures’, audio and video recordings so they can be fed back to policymakers.

Since showcasing ‘conference in pictures’ at the 2008 Festival, the researchers have developed this technique to help tackle other controversial issues. The team is working with the Youth Offending Service in Cumbria on ways of using this approach to target young people who abuse alcohol and drugs. The plan is also to use it at the 2009 Festival to gather public views on organ donation as well as on violent extremism.

Senior lecturer Mark Cutter, a member of the Cumbria Probation Board, says the project and ‘conference in pictures’ approach is a groundbreaking method of engaging young people in research and obtaining their views on complex issues. He says: “Working with the Probation Service and voluntary sector partners, it’s clear the public, especially young people, are not familiar with the criminal justice system. We wanted to provide an opportunity for these young people to explore and develop their own opinions and attitudes. Our project has given a group of high school students and others the opportunity to engage with a range of issues crucial to better understanding the realities of crime and punishment in society. And we are now developing it in a host of other ways to provide valuable material for policymakers.”
PUTTING THE BAIT IN DEBATE

The Debating Matters competition is not just about winning, but bringing real issues into public debate, as National Coordinator Tony Gilland tells Melanie Knetsch

SWEATY PALMS. THE worry that I haven’t prepared enough. The stress to ask sensible questions. These feelings are mirrored by contestants and judges alike at Debating Matters, a national competition where teams of 16-18-year-old secondary school students ‘argue it out’ over a motion, overseen by a panel of judges.

Now in its fifth year and including 188 schools, Debating Matters has steadily been gaining momentum across the UK. One winner from each elimination round is picked to compete in one of the eight regional finals, leading to the final and the ultimate prize – the Debating Matters national winner.

The idea for a national debating competition was sparked in 2003 by David Perks, a physics teacher who ran a debating society in his school. He felt that the debates his students participated in were focused on rhetoric and not on the issues or substances of the arguments. The idea was adopted by the Institute of Ideas (IoI) whose mission is to ‘expand the boundaries of public debate’, and in 2004 Debating Matters was launched.

“The aim of the competition is to get young people to engage in real debates which happen daily all around us,” says Tony Gilland, Director of the Science in Society Programme at the IoI and National Coordinator of Debating Matters. In 2008, teams argued over motions such as ‘the media should be prevented by law from intruding into the private lives of public figures’, ‘the London congestion charge model should be adopted by all major cities’ and ‘man not machines should explore space’. The judges listen to the cases being presented and challenge the arguments being made. After the 60-minute debate, the judges offer constructive, critical feedback and choose the team that presented the best argument.

One of the strengths of Debating Matters is that students from different backgrounds and schools have

“Taking part in the Debating Matters competition was a brilliant experience. In addition to gaining knowledge about a subject I would probably otherwise never have researched, I advanced my debating technique. This was the first time I had attempted a ‘proper’ debate, having previously only taken part in public speaking competitions. I am grateful that my first experience was at Debating Matters, because it helped me develop not only as a debater, but as a thinker too. The judges’ involvement added greatly to the event; their comments were extremely helpful.”

Seren Wynn Sandham Davies Holywell High School, Flintshire

“For me, debating serious issues with people of similar age and enthusiasm is a real joy. Having competed in Debating Matters for two years now, I know that debating is a great learning experience as well as a great confidence-booster. The judges’ comments are always helpful, and add a nice touch to what is a very enjoyable evening. I think it’s really important we keep debating in schools, not only so that we keep alive a very British tradition that we can all be proud of, but also to give a voice to the more opinionated students across the country.”

Humza Chaudhry Kings Norton Sixth Form, Birmingham
a chance to meet and learn from each other. Competing students get to ‘grill’ each other, the participating audience raise their own views, and in the breaks between debates the students relax and mingle.

“The students learn a lot from each other. Some are good at giving polished presentations, while others are better at the cut and thrust of the debate – a more ‘street fighter’ approach, and this offers something to learn from as well,” says Gilland.

The competition especially benefits from having professionals act as judges. A typical reaction is that the students “are amazed that busy professionals are bothered to come and listen to their debates”. While both students and teachers find it difficult when their team doesn’t make it through to the next round, they value the decision of the judges and the personal feedback that they give to each team. What’s more, the judges are often amazed at how articulate the students are.

The vision is to make Debating Matters self-sustaining with more schools involved, and to help link the professionals who act as judges with the participating schools. The Aimhigher government initiative has expanded the Debating Matters format to include year 11 and GCSE students. The competition has also branched abroad into India through collaboration with the British Council. This gives the opportunity not only to bring real world arguments to the competition, but also to bring students from around the world to the UK finals. The Debating Matters team feels this new perspective is essential to the students and the competition, as it emphasises the context debates take place in.

It seems that context is what Debating Matters is all about. Context helps the students to make and defend sensible arguments. Context is what encourages them to find the proof to support their statements. And above all, the context of the debates teaches the students that political isn’t the same as personal.

Melanie Knetsch, Senior Science in Society Manager, ESRC

The Institute of Ideas and Pfizer Debating Matters Competition is supported by a Wellcome Trust Engaging Science Society Award. The ESRC sponsors the Central and North West & North Wales Regions.

Web http://www.debatingmatters.com

Melanie Knetsch, Senior Science in Society Manager, ESRC

I must stress that the true value of my experience was not, as you might expect, the heat of the debate, nor the elation of stalking a weak link in your opponent’s armour. It was, in fact, the understanding of a contentious issue, which is only achieved when all sides of the argument are considered.

Matthew Crow, Winstanley College, Wigan

Adopting debating as a pastime outside of the school curriculum enabled me to learn valuable communication skills and enhance my vocabulary. Not only has it improved my confidence, I have also met new people and made new friends. I found it enlightening to debate such important issues and be able to express my opinions to a listening crowd. As it is in debating, you may not put the argument that suits your personal preference, and this has allowed me to override personal bias but still present an emotive argument.

Vicky Griffiths, Kings Norton Girls’ School, Birmingham
AUTISM IS SUCH a widely discussed and misunderstood condition that I felt it was vital to talk through my research findings with the parents and carers of the children with whom I worked,” says Dr Liz Pellicano at Bristol University.

In 2007 she was awarded the Michael Young Prize by the ESRC and the Young Foundation for her research. The prize, given to early career researchers whose work has the potential to make a far-reaching impact beyond academia, encourages them to communicate their research to a non-academic audience.

While most research on autism has focused on the causes, Dr Pellicano is studying the development of the disorder. By following a group of autistic children over a period of three years she found that there was no uniform pattern of development. Throughout the research she focused on contact with the people affected.

“My commitment to engaging people with autism and their carers in my research has grown directly out of interacting with these individuals during the course of my work. It initially emerged from a concern for the wellbeing of the people with whom I was working. The deeper importance of such engagement became clear to me, though, during a recent longitudinal study I carried out with 40 young children with autism,” she explains.

“I was interested in the extent of change over time with respect to their cognitive skills, but I also examined changes in their behavioural symptoms. When I went back to reassess these children, I was genuinely overwhelmed with their improvements, both in terms of behaviour and cognition. My surprise was largely due to naivety on my part, because unlike parents, educators and clinicians, researchers like me tend to see children only for isolated experimental studies, and usually once only. For this reason, the developments of children with autism are, in fact, extraordinarily rarely discussed in the research literature.”

The individual differences in development were striking. While some children with autism develop to live independently and obtain qualifications, others fail to achieve independence, employment or a social network. A key challenge in the research is to uncover the factors which lead to positive developmental outcomes, finding out the best things to do and the most suitable environments to maximise development potential.

“It is in this regard I believe that parents, carers, educators and people with autism themselves are able to contribute significantly to the research process,” says Dr Pellicano. “Children with autism, after all, grow up in a family, within a school, within a community, and I am certain that these environmental influences play a part in shaping the developing cognitive phenotype of autism.”

Dr Pellicano is currently holding discussion events with parents, professionals and policymakers, where they consider factors which might have shaped the development of the children. Planned projects include in-depth workshops with key user groups and individual case studies with parents and carers.

“This research could be powerfully informed by the understandings and outlooks of those who have direct experience of the condition itself,” Dr Pellicano concludes.
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT HAS many different definitions and for good reason: the diversity of potential audiences requires a number of different approaches. Sophisticated social science techniques used to great effect in a government consultation may not be the most appropriate approach to working with a group of primary school pupils.

School pupils are one of the biggest audiences for public engagement projects. Although the focus has mainly been on falling numbers of science, engineering and technology undergraduates, there is also a need to raise awareness about social science subjects. Focus groups participating in the Research Councils UK (RCUK) Public Attitudes to Science 2008 survey brainstormed the phrase ‘social science’. The survey report notes that “many people were guessing” and “there was considerable confusion about who actually studies these areas and what their qualifications would be”.

The breadth of social science and the importance of research in this area to our society is worth talking about – but public engagement is more than PR. In addition to raising awareness, the goal should not be to sell a career, subject or institution, but to provide a base for forming a well-balanced opinion and provide opportunities for dialogue around controversial topics.

These are difficult goals to achieve, and successful public engagement is time consuming, expensive and difficult to do well. But it has value: rapid advances in science and technology have resulted in international communities becoming increasingly connected, and research in one small area by a handful of specialists can have a global impact. With a wealth of (often conflicting) information available online, judging who to listen to and developing a well-informed opinion can be difficult.

A valuable concept to explore is the process and uncertainty of research itself. ‘Researchers in Residence’, a UK-wide scheme funded by RCUK and the Wellcome Trust, pairs academic researchers with teachers in a secondary school where they commit to a 14-24 hour residency. Researchers in Scotland are asked to visit a secondary school where they commit to a 14-24 hour residency.

Researchers in Residence encourages contact between researchers and secondary school students by placing researchers in secondary schools across the UK. It is part of the ESRC Genomics Network.

The Centre for Social and Economic Research on Innovation in Genomics (Innogen) is part of the ESRC Genomics Network.

Researchers in Residence Scotland Regional Coordinator

Lara Crossland, Innogen Communications and Networking Officer, Researchers in Residence Scotland Regional Coordinator

COMMUNICATING SCIENCE

The breadth of social science and the importance of research in this area to our society is worth talking about – but public engagement is more than PR. From the media about cloning and stem cells and made collages from press clippings and their own drawings to present their views.

Art and science often seem they should be at different ends of the spectrum, but they share some similarities. Pupils used to answers in textbooks caught a glimpse of the creativity needed for groundbreaking science and the potential to use art to represent their opinions. As one put it, “they [pupils] haven’t been thinking like scientists for the last decade of their lives like most of the people I speak to – they have a fresh opinion”. Many also report confidence in their ability to communicate and discuss their work with non-specialists, and also a new appreciation of the importance of doing so.

Seeing familiar topics in a new light can bring a whole new understanding. For the ESRC Festival of Social Science 2008, Innogen researchers and other colleagues from the Genomics Network ran events at the Baltic Mill in Gateshead and the Glasgow Science Centre to explore science from an artistic and social perspective.

Working with artists and social scientists, science pupils yet to study DNA used their imagination to draw genes and produced squiggles and images a million miles away from the double helix icon we are so regularly presented with. Another group investigated stories...
DISCUSS, DISCOVER, DEBATE

Research meets the public at the ESRC Festival of Social Science, as shown by this sample of upcoming events

**CHANGING THE WAY WE LIVE**

IN CARDIFF A one-day ‘sustainability fayre’ with stalls, displays and interactive stands will demonstrate how we can live sustainably and change the way we travel, eat, buy and sell. The aim of the event is to show visitors how they can make small changes in their business or home life to achieve a more sustainable future. Visitors will have the opportunity to interact with local suppliers, councils, businesses and research organisations.

**WHAT’S SOCIAL ABOUT SPORT?**

THIS MULTIMEDIA EVENT brings research into the community and social science into the sports arena, giving some ideas about why sport matters, and how social science research makes sense of sport. The event includes research into the media representation of sport on the BBC World Service, with a presentation by author and broadcaster David Goldblatt, online material, recorded conversations with people who work in sport, and examples of material from the Open University’s ‘This Sporting Planet’ course.

**JUST AN AVERAGE FAMILY?**

WE MIGHT ALL feel our family is unusual at times, but here’s the chance to actually check it out online. By answering a few questions you can compare your family to the 8,000 families with young children who have been taking part in ‘Growing up in Scotland’, a study running since 2005. The online event offers a chance to find out what families are like and how they compare to your own. People will be able to engage in the survey in relation to their own family circumstances, giving them an insight into the data and how it can be useful to policymakers.

**THE SOCIAL LIFE OF PLANTS**

AT KEW GARDENS in London the ‘social life of plants’ will be explored through films, talks and learning activities. Anthropologists and ethnobotanists will demonstrate our relationship to plants and how we interact with them on a daily basis for medicine, material objects, health, conservation and food. Participants can also try their hand at basket weaving and identifying wild plants, as well as exploring Kew’s exhibits. The aim is to inspire networks of people willing to engage in common concerns such as climate change, biodiversity and conservation.

**FEEDING THE FUTURE CITY**

DESIGNERS AND COMMUNITIES are leading a new ‘green revolution’, adapting urban infrastructures to feed our cities beyond the age of cheap oil. Key players in urban design, cultural geography and the urban growing community will present innovative and radical ideas about how we might reconfigure our urban areas and link the challenges of climate change, food production and design – for example by growing food on façades and roofs or in urban parks. Participants in the event are encouraged to join in the discussion and start thinking ‘out of the box’ about ways we can make our cities greener.

The ESRC Festival of Social Science runs from Friday 6 March until Sunday 15 March 2009. The festival events are designed to communicate information about the social sciences and how social science impacts on our lives. For more info on these and other events visit http://www.esrcfestival.ac.uk
Despite concerns about energy security and carbon emissions, the public is still reluctant to embrace nuclear power, says Professor Nick Pidgeon

The 30th anniversary of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant accident at Harrisburg, USA, reminds us that until very recently one could not have envisaged the renewal of the civilian nuclear programme in Britain. The decade following the accident saw the peak of opposition to nuclear power in both Britain and abroad, while the UK government’s subsequent decision to liberalise the energy markets also exposed the fragile economic case for nuclear power.

Current energy policy is now driven by the need to meet tough climate change targets and ensure domestic energy security. These two issues have together opened a ‘policy window’ for the renewal of nuclear power. But how far is this justified, and has public opinion really shifted in line with the policy discourses?

The current generation of reactors are undoubtedly ‘low carbon’ when compared to conventional fossil fuels, but critics point out that nuclear power is only one of many possible responses to climate change. More aggressive development of domestic renewable energy, or relatively simple measures to improve efficiency at the point of use, would appear to offer better ways of addressing the fundamental causes of climate change, while both hold the added advantage of contributing to national energy security (by replacing some fossil fuel imports).

There is also uncertainty over the economic case for nuclear power, and radioactive waste disposal remains unresolved in Britain as elsewhere.

Public acceptability also remains an important matter. Opposition to the replacement of nuclear power stations in Britain has been decreasing of late, with very recent national polling indicating for the first time since the Three Mile Island accident more support in favour of renewal than against. However, our own ESRC research has shown that a large proportion of the existing support at national level is conditional (and hence potentially fragile), something which we term ‘acceptance’ or ‘rejection’. The most common view in a major survey conducted in 2008 around the current plants at Oldbury-on-Severn and Hinkley Point was an ambivalent one. These individuals saw nuclear power as risky and undesirable, but were prepared to accept it locally because they believed, for the time being at least, that it might be needed for addressing climate change and energy security. Other local residents expressed high confidence in nuclear power and trusted the local operators to avoid mishaps, while a further sub-group believed that the risks of nuclear power outweighed any benefits and were distrustful of the nuclear industry and the government.

The vast majority of people surveyed also believed the industry and the government should involve them in plans for siting new nuclear power stations locally and had concerns about radioactive waste. The latter, given current plans to store irradiated fuel on-site throughout the lifetime of any new generation of stations, would appear to set a particularly acute dilemma for local communities.

Nuclear power remains a hugely controversial technology with technical, economic and above all social barriers remaining to its further development. A genuine dialogue about our possible energy futures would seem a fundamental prerequisite for avoiding the mistakes of 30 years ago.

Many people view nuclear energy as a ‘devil’s bargain’, a technology of last resort in the face of climate change.

Still unsure about nuclear

Professor Nick Pidgeon, Cardiff University, led the Living with Nuclear Power in Britain research project with Dr Karen Henwood and Mr Peter Simmons as part of the ESRC Social Contexts and Responses to Risk (SCARR) Priority Network.

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Web http://www.kent.ac.uk/scarr/scarrprojects/scarrprojects.htm
Web http://www.understanding-risk.org
Here we present an at-a-glance overview of the key issues in Britain today, focusing on health and wellbeing. All statistics are from the Office of National Statistics unless stated.

**Life expectancy**

77

The age a boy born today in Britain is expected to live to. The figure is 82 for girls – eight years longer than 25 years ago.

2,462 per million males and 1,559 per million females died of circulatory diseases such as heart disease or strokes in 2006, almost two-thirds less than in 1971.

“**It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver**” Mahatma Ghandi

**Diet**

Consumption of fruit and vegetables in the home

By income grouping of UK household, 2005/06, grams per person per week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCOME TOP FIFTH</th>
<th>INCOME BOTTOM FIFTH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fresh fruit</td>
<td>Fresh fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh vegetables</td>
<td>Fresh vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processed potatoes</td>
<td>Processed potatoes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Processed products</td>
<td>Processed products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh green vegetables</td>
<td>Fresh green vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other fresh vegetables</td>
<td>Other fresh vegetables</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

62% of adults and 30 per cent of children in the UK are overweight, with 24 per cent of adults and 16 per cent of children obese – the highest obesity rate in Europe.

32% of women in the bottom fifth income distribution are obese compared to 19 per cent in the top fifth. Men are no more likely to be overweight, but there is a slight increase in obesity.

1 in 3 adults in the UK will be obese by 2012. Source: Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health

“The only way to keep your health is to eat what you don’t want, drink what you don’t like, and do what you’d rather not” Mark Twain
Happiness and satisfaction

Satisfaction with standard of living by age, 2007, England
Source: Omnibus Survey, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Men (%)</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-21</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-29</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

77% of men report that they are satisfied with their life overall. The figure is lower among women at 75 per cent. These figures are almost exactly the same as they were a decade ago.

5,377
The number of suicides in adults aged 15 and over. This is 167 less than in 2006 (5,544) and 940 less than in 1991 (6,317).

“Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory” Albert Schweitzer

Sexual health

Usual method of contraception (%) in 2004/05
By women aged 16 to 49, Great Britain

750,000
people in Britain were treated for sexually transmitted diseases last year, and one in ten sexually active adults is estimated to have Chlamydia. Source: NHS Online

Drinking and smoking

Alcohol-related death rate, UK 1981-2007
Age standardised rates per 100,000 population

41,768
The amount of girls aged 15-17 from England and Wales falling pregnant in 2006 – 13.3 per cent less than in 1998.

33% of men and 29 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were smokers in 2006, compared to 13 per cent of men and 12 per cent of women aged 60 and over.
OTHERHOOD IS a universal experience. But for millions of women, it is an experience that has changed beyond recognition in a single generation. Record numbers return to work, many are deferring motherhood to a later age, single parenthood is commonplace. In January, French Justice Minister Rachida Dati caused a stir when she managed to combine all three – back at work in five days, a baby at 43, and a ‘mystery’ absent father.

The ESRC has sought to unravel some of these issues by funding an Open University study, led by Professor Rachel Thompson and Dr Mary Jane Kehily, into how today’s mothers differ from their mothers and grandmothers. The project, The Making of Modern Motherhoods, explores how social change affects motherhood, and the role of books, magazines, friends, relatives and partners.

More than 100 individuals were interviewed, including expectant first-time mothers aged 15-48, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and fathers.

As Professor Thompson puts it: “Becoming a mother has always been a profound moment of personal change which ties us to the past, the future and to each other. Yet what it means to be a mother is changing.”

The ESRC is also funding a series of seminars on motherhood, specifically how huge markets have grown up around the ideology of the ‘nuclear family’ and notions of how to be a good mother.

So what does the latest research tell us? The rise in educated women has inevitably led to more women holding down careers, a situation which creates a conflict for some when they become mothers. Professor Thompson said many career women ‘resisted’ the idea that becoming a mother would radically change their identity.

Yet motherhood is a transforming experience, for good or bad: as some put it, it is like being ‘the same person in a different country’. The women most adaptable to becoming mothers saw motherhood as an escape route from a boring school or a dull job, or a way to put someone else ‘first’ and make more meaning of their lives.

For educated women with careers they loved, the job description that comes with motherhood was sometimes less appealing. And there was a second struggle – rejecting their own mothers’ version of mothering. Older and more educated mothers were more likely to spurn their mothers’...
parenting methods and impose their own. Grandmothers often saw their own experience as ‘out of date’. But while many grandparents recognised ways in which the experience of mothering had improved over a generation, they also worried that babies were more pampered and the rhythms of their daughters’ daily lives too intense.

“Decisions about child care and whether or not to be a stay-at-home mother is a particularly sensitive topic between mothers and daughters,” Professor Thompson said. “Where daughters choose an opposite course to their mothers, both parties struggle with feelings of rejection and failure.”

Such feelings are compellingly articulated in Alison Pearson’s novel *I Don’t Know How She Does it*, which tells of Kate Reddy, a hedge fund manager, who struggles with work and motherhood. Her fund stays organised but her house and family fall apart. As the author says: “Kate has a ball-breaking job and two small children she loves but seldom sees. She counts seconds like other women count calories. In Kate’s life, everything Goes Perfectly as long as Everything Goes Perfectly. Children will not fall ill, toilet paper will be restocked by unseen hands, holidays will offer instant refreshment, and there is no such thing as exhaustion or panic. As if. She has parents-in-law who disapprove of her and, at the school gate, there are the non-working mums – the Mothers Superior – who smile smugly and say, I don’t know how you do it.”

Professor Thompson’s research tells a similar story. Working daughters of stay-at-home mothers struggle with complicated feelings about whether they are doing the right thing. But, in general, their decisions are made on the basis of financial necessity. Professor Thompson said: “In many middle class families, today’s mothers are the first generation to combine career and family. In many working class families there is more continuity between generations, with women combining low paid work and caring responsibility.”

Despite the media’s image of a ‘supergran’ – doing the school run and a hefty chunk of the child care – the role of grandmothers may be diminishing, she said. Grandmothers are most involved when living locally and this is most common among working class communities. If there has been geographical and social mobility, grandmothers are less central.

Although grandmothers identify the increased involvement of men in parenting as one of the most significant changes in their lifetime, Professor Thompson believes the change is primarily symbolic. “Only one of our 62 first-time mothers reported that the baby’s father would be the main carer and the division of labour after birth tended to be very traditional,” she said. “Nevertheless the few fathers we interviewed saw themselves as parenting in a very different way to their own father, being much more ‘hands on’.”

So as the UK celebrates Mother’s Day on 22 March, what have we learned? That contemporary motherhood is more diverse than we would think, that social change has been uneven, and that this diversity makes it difficult for the challenges of mothering to find political expression, says Professor Thompson.

“The absence of a coherent maternal politics means women have to negotiate these challenges as individuals. The political agenda in other European countries is dominated by concerns about population fall, raising the question of how society can make parenthood attractive. In the UK we still seem to look at motherhood in terms of a lifestyle choice or a social burden.”

Sarah Womack, former social affairs correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*
New options for Britain

The last ten years has brought huge changes domestically and abroad, and the new political landscape is reflected in a new review examining key policy areas. Options for a New Britain, by Varun Uberoi, Adam Coutts, Ian McLean and David Halpern, looks into the challenges facing the UK.

BACK IN 1996, A TEAM of young academics published Options for Britain: a strategic policy review. A UK general election was anticipated, which was widely expected to (and in the event did) lead to a change of government. However, the motives behind Options were not partisan. The editors believed that facts and data were vital, but also that the task facing an incoming government was not predetermined. Political will and imagination can achieve a great deal, and 12 years on we still believe this.

Hence we decided to repeat the Options process, and a lot has changed in British politics. Some of it is due to conscious choices by the Labour governments, but much of it is driven by external shocks such as the September 11 terrorist attacks on the USA and the global economic shock of 2008.

There is also, however, a sense of déjà vu. The government faces a significant challenge, with low popularity in the polls and a tough election approaching. An election result much like 1992 is possible, when John Major hung on to power in the face of similarly negative polls and public concerns about the economy. It is also conceivable that Labour will learn the trick of its Scandinavian sister parties to reinvent and refresh itself and hold power for another generation.

It is in these historical moments that outside thinking can have a decisive influence, helping to inform the public and key commentators, and to provide a source of new ideas for incoming policymakers.

This is what Options for a New Britain – funded by the ESRC, The Gatsby Foundation, Nuffield College and the Fell Fund – is trying to achieve.

We explain how the Labour government has performed since this exercise was undertaken in the mid-1990s. Leading experts conduct an overarching review of both traditional policy areas like the economy, health, housing, education and crime as well as new areas of policy like social mobility, extremism, climate change and energy policy. We also set out what the major challenges in these various policy areas are and what options an incoming government – regardless of its political persuasion – has to address them.

In doing so, it is clear that the public service-dominated politics of the late 1990s and early 2000s was rather simple compared to today. A party’s commitments to public services could...
be roughly measured by the scale of its financial pledges to the public sector. That argument is not so easy to run today. Spending on public services in the UK has moved decisively towards the European average, and away from the lower levels of the USA. In as far as 1997 was a choice, Britons chose the European model. But the public is far from convinced of the case for more spending from current levels, and the global downturn has greatly reduced room for manoeuvre. One theme that emerges from this review is the difficulties that will emerge as parties inevitably shift from arguments about quantity to arguments about quality and how to get to get more bang for your buck.

In retrospect, the issues that preoccupied the original Options for Britain also look surprisingly ‘domestic’. A cursory glance at changing public concerns or even a comparison of the chapter titles of the two books suggest the change. There is no doubt that global environmental limitations are pressing into political and everyday awareness in a way that is very different to even a decade ago. Terrorism is no longer a matter of conflict in Northern Ireland (though this still simmers) but of global ideological conflict. Energy security is a familiar phrase in a nation that has gone from being an exporter to being dependent on often unstable sources in distant parts of the world. The discussion on ‘Britain in Europe’ that dominated debate a decade ago has been decisively broadened to ‘Britain’s role in the world’. There is also a pervasive feeling that ‘government cannot do it alone’. As President Obama echoed in his inauguration speech, we are moving towards an era of personal responsibility, where our social and economic behaviour must change if we are to successfully deal with the challenges that lie ahead.

The current Options process reflects how the UK has changed since the mid-1990s, and pinpoints where the government’s performance has been good, where it has been dependent on fortuitous social and economic contexts, where mistakes were made and where gaps remain. But the process was not merely evaluative. We also address what the major current challenges are and what can be done about them. In doing so we hope that this book will inform the thoughts of policymakers and aid their understanding of what has happened over the last decade and what the priorities for the next one should be. This is certainly what it has done for us.

Policy and politics can be thankless tasks and often shaped by the exigencies of what Harold Macmillan called ‘events’. If you solve a problem, it is soon forgotten. Instead, you are judged by your failures, your ability to take on new challenges, and by the resonance of your message with the values, aspirations and fears of the public.
For decades trade unions have been in decline, steadily losing members, support and influence. With rising unemployment and strike actions back in the news, David Smith asks if the recession could spell the return of the unions.

Trade unions back in action?

For decades trade unions have been in decline, steadily losing members, support and influence. With rising unemployment and strike actions back in the news, David Smith asks if the recession could spell the return of the unions.

Union density – the proportion of the employed workforce belonging to a union – has declined in most advanced economies in the past 25 years. In some countries, such as the United States, the decline in density began in the 1950s. Mostly, however, it is a phenomenon that began around 1980. This was when Margaret Thatcher took on the unions in Britain. Important though this was, international evidence suggests union density would have declined anyway.

Professor Blanchflower and Bryson demonstrate that the decline in union membership has persisted. The latest figures show that at the end of 2007 only 16.1 per cent of private sector workers were union members, compared with 24 per cent in 1993. The long economic upturn the UK economy enjoyed was accompanied by declining union membership. In the public sector the decline was less marked, from 64.4 to 59 per cent. The public sector remains the main area of union power and influence in the UK.

One common explanation for the decline in union membership, aside from changes in employment legislation, has traditionally been the ‘compositional’ argument. The closure of large swathes of UK manufacturing and the consequent loss of big industrial plants, which were heavily unionised, has been seen as an important reason for union decline.

Professor Blanchflower and Bryson’s pioneering detailed examination of the workplace data, however, finds that the compositional explanation is relatively unimportant. “We have shown that union decline is only partly due to compositional change among workplaces,” they conclude. “Indeed, most of the decline is ‘within-group’ change and can be observed among all segments of the British workplace population.”

With this striking decline in recognition, what are the effects of union representation...
on the financial and employment performance of workplaces? This is where it gets trickier. Economists have tended to identify these effects, on financial performance, employment growth and the industrial relations climate, as negative. Union wage effects, on the other hand, tend to be positive. Unionised workforces tend to enjoy a wage premium over their non-unionised counterparts.

The CEP researchers found that the negative impacts, often taken as a given by researchers, are less evident in the recent data than in earlier studies. One possibility is that the power of unions to disrupt business operations has weakened, though this is not supported by the evidence. Another is that unions have adopted a more collaborative approach in their relations with employers.

The negative impact of unions on financial performance appears to have weakened, with the gap between unionised and non-unionised workplaces having narrowed. The data is less conclusive on employment and the industrial relations climate, however, leading Blanchflower and Bryson to conclude that it is too early to claim that there been a change. Effects remain on wages, though these appear to be smaller than in the past.

In important respects, however, it may be that just as the unions may alter their pitch to potential members in a recession, so some of these effects may only really be tested when times are tough. “We would expect smaller union effects when economic conditions are good because employers are often in a better position to concede union demands when they are profitable,” Professor Blanchflower and Bryson note. “It is in economic downturns, when unionised labour proves better able than non-unionised labour to hold onto the gains it has made during good times, that one expects union effects to come to the fore.” So watch this space.

Unions, of course, operate in a globalised labour market. How does this affect their ability to look after the interests of their workers? It is a big question, which Dr Paulo Bastos of the University of Nottingham has been investigating in another ESRC-funded project.

The concerns about the labour market effects of globalisation are well known – that they may lead to a ‘race to the bottom’ for wages. How does trade liberalisation impact on wages and union density if union membership is not compulsory? Bastos is examining whether theoretical predictions on the effects of globalisation match up to the reality.

In the end, it is the ability of the unions to respond to change that will determine their appeal to potential members, and their ability to shape future labour market developments. The jury is still out on these questions.

David Smith, Economics Editor of the Sunday Times

Despite the decline of trade unions over recent decades, today’s economic climate may herald their resurgence.

Trade Unions and Globalisation, Contact Dr Paulo Bastos, University of Nottingham. Email/paulo bastos@nottingham.ac.uk. Web http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/economics/staff/details/paulo_bastos.htm

Union Decline in Britain (CEP Discussion Paper), Contact Alex Bryson, Centre for Economic Performance. Email/ a.j.bryson@lse.ac.uk. Web http://cep.lse.ac.uk/ _new/publications/abstract.asp?index=3144

SPRING 2009 SOCIETY NOW 25
The shadow and the evidence

Research evidence is becoming increasingly crucial for politicians, says David Willetts. The Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills tells Heather Stewart about research, policy-making and predicting the credit crunch.

HEATHER STEWART What did you study at university?
DAVID WILLETTS Well, I did PPE (politics, philosophy and economics) at university, and as I’m a natural PPE-ist, really, I’ve been doing PPE ever since. I specialised a bit in philosophy, but it’s a fantastic course. I do think that in terms of understanding the modern world, you’re getting the analytical rigour of philosophy, the empirical understanding of institutions with politics, and the tools of economics.

When I came down from university I went into the Treasury as an official. I could have had a career there – but I joined it in 1978 at the age of 22, and you can’t join an institution and be there until you’re 60. Denis Healey was the Chancellor. I was the secretary of something called the Public Expenditure Survey Committee. Later I was the Private Secretary to the Financial Secretary – Nigel Lawson and then Nicholas Ridley – and my final post was in monetary policy. Then I was approached for a secondment to the Number Ten Policy Unit.

HS So when did you decide to run for Parliament?
DW Well, I was in the Policy Unit from 1984-86. There were eight people, and I covered the Treasury, and what was then the DHSS, which was what really got me involved in social policy. Then it was decision time. I had got to the age of 30. I could have gone back to the Treasury, but instead I decided that I really wanted to have a political career, because working for Mrs Thatcher was incredibly exciting. I didn’t want to always be a back-room boy – part of the challenge was not just to work out what you wanted to do and why, but to try and explain it, and win the argument for it. I resigned from the civil service and went and ran a think-tank, the Centre for Policy Studies – and then ran for Parliament in 1992.

HS Does your academic training help you in your job now, as Shadow Minister for Innovation, Universities and Skills?
DW I think it’s become more important for lots of reasons. In Britain today it’s harder and harder to win an argument by an appeal to deference, or an appeal to tradition, or even an appeal to ideology. You can only persuade people by an appeal to the evidence.

Even if people have their own personal ideology or political principles, it’s still more and more important for the political community to be able to rest what we say on evidence.

HS Do you still get time to keep in touch with contemporary research?
DW Yes, I am a heavy user. I would read some kind of research paper from the British research community most days. I am a consumer of the product.

Even if people have their own personal ideology, it’s still more and more important for the political community to be able to rest what we say on evidence.

HS How useful do you find that ‘product’?
DW My frustration is, I think, that often the analysis using the latest statistical techniques is incredibly sophisticated, and the conclusions in the last four paragraphs are cavalier about policy. You get some incredibly cavalier remarks about what should be done, with much less rigour than they’ve applied to the data. The academic community is not trained to think of the ‘so what?’ question. There could be more of an effort to understand the policy process – it’s not just “we’ve got this data, let’s think what statistical games we can play with it”.

HS Do you have much contact with academic experts?
DW Yes, one of the things I like about shadowing this department is the opportunity to go around to colleges and universities. I have got very interested in evolutionary biology, and to what extent it can help us to understand the world. I was going to the University of Exeter to visit and see what they were
up to recently, and I was able to spare three-quarters of an hour to spend with John Dupré, and talk about the legacy of Darwin.

As another example, in the Guardian on 19 January there were two letters, one by Jonathan Wadsworth, who is at Bristol, and one by John Goldthorpe, at Nuffield, arguing opposite views on the returns to higher education, both heavily influenced in different ways by Francis Green’s work at the University of Kent; so I bashed out an email to each of them, saying “next time you’re coming through Westminster, perhaps you might drop in for a chat”.

HS Do you read popular social science books, such as the recent bestseller Nudge?
DW I remember when it was called ‘liberal paternalism’, and that was long before it became a bestseller! The most rigorous part of the book is that pensions stuff; that’s rather more interesting than painting a fly on the urinals in airports, and finding that it reduces spillage – another one of the examples they use.

HS Your nickname is ‘Two Brains’. Is it unfashionable for politicians to be too clever?
DW You have to be very careful. Most of these ideas can be conveyed in layman’s language. If you’re using jargon and making it difficult to understand, you just haven’t understood it. Your aim is to take some of this research and use it to inform your policy, but also try to communicate it in a way that’s persuasive to people outside the academic community. You can end up being too sensitive to evidence. People want predictability, sustainability – you can’t just change your view overnight, in the light of every new piece of evidence.

HS How well have economists as a profession emerged from the credit crunch? On the one hand the public is turning to them to explain what’s happening, but on the other, many of them failed to spot what was coming.

DW I think that there were warnings being sounded. Someone for whom I have a lot of respect is Martin Weale at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research. He’s a guy who follows the evidence, and I certainly was becoming convinced by him, and incredibly worried about the very low savings ratio. You could see that there was a consumer boom, financed by high levels of borrowing and low saving. There were economists warning that it couldn’t last. As to when and how the crash would come, that was much harder to predict.

I think what has suffered, though, is what I think of as a sort of Cambridge or Chicago ‘all the information is in the price’ economics. I think the crisis has shown the importance of the idea that institutions matter – that prices do not always have all the information embodied in them.

As it’s moved faster, a lot of conventional wisdom has been thrown out of the window. I found myself on Radio 4’s Any Questions, arguing that the government should be borrowing £50 billion to underwrite loans to businesses. If someone had told me even two years ago that this would be something that I as a member of the shadow cabinet would be arguing for, I would never have believed them.

HS Is there another subject you would love to study if you had the time?
DW I guess there are all the things that you now understand much better than when you first studied them. My fantasy would be to have a year to catch up on all the things that I would have liked to read. I was certainly interested in history; and I think philosophy is in a far better state than when I studied it – moral philosophy is much more interesting now. I am also fascinated by evolutionary biology and by accounts of human nature, like Steven Pinker’s The Blank Slate, for example.

Heather Stewart, Economics Editor of the Observer
Publications

Innovation in Environmental Policy?
Integrating the Environment for Sustainability

Environmental policy integration, designed to deliver sustainable development, is a politically important challenge. This account offers a resource for those interested in environmental politics, as well as the broader theme of governance for sustainable development. Based on research from the ESRC Centre for Social and Economic Research, it will interest a range of readers, from undergraduate and postgraduate students to senior academics.

Economic Gangsters: Corruption, Violence and the Poverty of Nations

Economic Gangsters: Corruption, Violence, and the Poverty of Nations uses economics to get inside the heads of the secretive, chaotic and brutal worlds inhabited by ‘economic gangsters’. Aising from research from the ESRC Centre for Economic Performance, the book proposes solutions that can make a difference to the world’s poor, including cash infusions to defuse violence in times of drought, and steering the World Bank away from aid programmes most susceptible to corruption.

Beyond the State in Rural Uganda

In this innovative study, Dr Ben Jones of the University of East Anglia argues that scholars too often assume that the state is the most important force behind change in local political communities in Africa. Beyond the State in Rural Uganda offers a new anthropological perspective on how to think about processes of social and political change in poorer parts of the world, appealing to anyone interested in African development.

Energy for the Future: A New Agenda

Cutting carbon emissions is urgent, but energy policy is also concerned with security, efficiency and access. In the transition to sustainable energy, developing the necessary fuels, technologies and policies will strain many energy policy orthodoxies. Energy for the Future: A New Agenda, from the ESRC Sussex Energy Group at the University of Sussex, analyses the changing contexts and fault lines, and proposes new ways forward that are both politically viable and likely to be effective.

Energy Efficiency and Sustainable Consumption: The Rebound Effect

Energy Efficiency and Sustainable Consumption: The Rebound Effect, also from the ESRC Sussex Energy Group, summarises the current state of knowledge on how governments seek to improve energy efficiency to reduce carbon emissions. However, improving efficiency may not be as effective as is generally assumed, as ‘rebound effects’ may take back some or all of the savings.

Reframing Social Citizenship

As part of the ESRC Social Concepts and Responses to Risk Programme, Reframing Social Citizenship is an analysis of the pressures on social citizenship. The book explores changes in work and the family, political actors, population ageing and the processes within government in the context of globalisation. It argues that the logic of rational action is able to explain how reciprocity arises and is sustained but offers a weak foundation for social inclusion and social trust.

For more details visit http://press.princeton.edu
News briefs

ESRC STRATEGIC PLAN 2009-14
The ESRC is currently developing a new strategic plan which will set out the Council’s key priorities for 2009-2014. As part of the development process, a national consultation was held over the summer and autumn of 2008 with ESRC stakeholders. In 2009 a number of regional town meetings and stakeholder meetings have been held with university groups and associations, and with representatives of the business, voluntary and public sectors. The new plan is expected to be published in May 2009. For further information visit http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

CLIMATE CHANGE ECONOMICS AND POLICY
The ESRC Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy, jointly directed by Professor Judith Rees at the London School of Economics and Political Science and Professor Andy Gouldson at the University of Leeds, with Professor Sir Nicholas Stern as chair, was launched in late January 2009. The centre will receive in the region of £5 million over five years in the first instance. The core of the centre’s work is to provide both government and business with evidence that will support their decision-making processes and improve policy-making on one of the most critical issues facing the world today. For more details, visit http://www.cccep.ac.uk

INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARKING REVIEW OF UK SOCIOLOGY
The ESRC has formed a partnership with the British Sociological Association (BSA) and the Heads and Professors of Sociology in order to internationally benchmark the quality and impact of UK sociology. The review will be managed by a steering committee of senior academics and users of sociology research, chaired by Professor Sue Scott, President of the BSA. This is an important initiative to highlight the international standing and contribution of UK sociology, identify ways of enhancing performance and capacity, and promote future research agendas. For more information visit http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Support/Evaluation/publications/IBR.aspx

TEACHERS TV – TOMORROW’S TEACHERS
Teachers TV in association with the ESRC is launching a cross-curriculum project called Tomorrow’s Teacher. It provides an engaging set of resources, such as inspirational programmes, lesson plans, worksheets and related video content for teachers. In addition to the launch there are two competitions to enter, offering the chance to win prizes. For full details of these competitions and how to get involved please visit http://www.teachers.tv/tomorrow

PROFESSORIAL FELLOWSHIPS
The ESRC Professorial Fellowship scheme provides funding for the UK’s leading scholars to push back the frontiers of social science. The awards allow for the time and opportunity to carry out cutting edge research that will deepen our understanding.
of a number of critical social science questions. Six grants were funded in the last competition. Successful applications include: Professor Albert Weale’s project at Essex University studying social contract, deliberative democracy and public policy; Professor Katrina Brown’s research into resilient development in social ecological systems at the University of East Anglia; and Professor Herb Marsh’s study based at Oxford University, investigating substantive methodological synergies that will make important contributions in understanding critical educational issues. In addition, Professor John Hills at the London School of Economics is investigating the dynamics and design of social policies; Professor Graham Loomes at the University of East Anglia is carrying out research into modelling imprecise preferences and identifying the implications for theory and policy; and Professor Russell Spears at Cardiff University is looking into a SITE (social identity theory extended) map for understanding intergroup relations. For more details visit http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

OUR SOCIETY TODAY BLOGS

Young people’s opinions count too. Now growing in size, the ESRC Our Society Today blog welcomes comments, articles and opinions on everyday issues. Views already shared by bloggers describe how they disagree with what has generally been publicised about them, especially in the media. We want to encourage more discussion and debate, and get to the heart of the different views that are out there. If you feel that you have something to say, please register and write a post or comment at http://www.oursocietytoday.org

THE MICHAEL YOUNG PRIZE AND THE NEVILLE BUTLER PRIZE

This year’s winners of the Michael Young Prize and the Neville Butler Memorial Prize will be announced at the ESRC Festival of Social Science 2009. Prizes are awarded to early career social science researchers whose research has the potential to make a positive and far-reaching impact beyond academia and effectively communicate their socially relevant research to a non-academic audience. The prizes have been set up in honour of the late Lord Michael Young of Darlington and the late Neville Butler, a distinguished paediatrician and Professor of child health. For further information visit http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

MAJOR NEW RESEARCH INITIATIVE FOR HOMELESSNESS

A major new research initiative has been launched with the aim of informing government policy and practice, and finding solutions to bring vulnerable homeless people in from the margins of our society. The initiative (in collaboration with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Tenant Services Authority, the National Institute of Mental Health in England and the Department of Health) intends to develop a greater understanding of homeless people who have to cope with multiple problems in their lives, such as drug or alcohol dependencies, severe mental health problems and institutional experiences, such as prison or long-term hospital stays. Four projects will be funded to provide a solid evidence base for further policy and practice development. For more details visit http://www.homeless.org.uk

ESRC RESEARCH CENTRES COMPETITION

The ESRC Research Centres Competition has announced three major centres to be funded: The Centre for Economic Performance 2010-15, directed by Professor John Van Reenen at the London School of Economics and Political Science; the Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy, based at the Institute of Fiscal Studies and directed by Professor Richard Blundell; and the Centre for Competitive Advantage in the Global Economy, directed by Professor Nicholas Crafts at the University of Warwick. The competition awards funding to centres which will make important and significant contributions to the development of research capacity in the UK and connect with potential research users including those in business, government or the voluntary sector. For more information visit http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

EVENTS

FEBRUARY-APRIL 2009

ESRC Global Financial Crisis lectures

The ESRC is holding a series of lectures providing a platform for expert researchers to explore the important economic and policy issues facing the UK and the wider global society. Aimed at the public, including opinion formers and businesses, attendees will have the opportunity to join in the discussion and hear the social science issues behind, and developing from, the economic crisis. For more information visit http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

12 MARCH 2009

Options for a New Britain

How well has the UK and the government performed in the last decade? What are the big choices facing us ahead? As part of the Festival of Social Science, the ESRC invites you to this corporate event where you can meet the authors of the Options for a New Britain policy review, discuss the findings and receive your copy of the book. For more information contact ESRC@vistaevents.co.uk

30-31 MARCH 2009

Future of Financial Regulation Conference

Part of the ESRC World Economy and Finance Research Programme, the conference will focus on the regulatory implications of the credit crisis. It is one of a series of events to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments. Visit http://www.gla.ac.uk/Departments/schooloflaw/fofrconference2009

SPRING 2009 SOCIETY NOW 31
The ESRC magazine *Society Now* aims to raise awareness of our research and its impact. Aimed at a wide range of readers from the MP to the businessperson, the voluntary worker to the teacher, the public through to the social scientist, it is published three times a year (spring, summer and early autumn).

*Society Now* offers a readable, intelligent, concise overview of current issues concerning society.

Subscription to *Society Now* is free. To receive your copy, visit:

http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/societynow/subscribe

ESRC also issues a bi-monthly e-newsletter aimed at the academic community, containing information on funding opportunities, corporate news, community updates and events. For more information and to sign up, visit:

http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/enews

The ESRC is an independent organisation, established by Royal Charter in 1965, and funded mainly by the Government.

More at http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

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