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UK Policy Agendas, 1900-2005

This paper outlines the active and future streams of the *UK Policy Agendas Project, 1900-2005*. It is a report on research in progress as well as a statement of future ambitions. The project uses the framework of coding topics and subtopics developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993; 2004). There are a number of prospective varieties of “policy agendas” in the UK political system that are considered as within the scope of this project, which relate to the various arenas for agenda setting and policy-making. Some are equivalent to components from the original *Policy Agendas Project* and *Congressional Bills Project* and others are unique to the UK.

1. Queen's Speeches
2. Acts of Parliament
3. Command Papers
4. Parliamentary Select Committees
5. Prime Minister's Questions
6. Statutory Instruments
7. Public Opinion
8. Media
9. Social and Economic Indicators

At present, the *UK Policy Agendas Project, 1900-2005* is actively compiling and analysing empirical data for Queen's Speeches, Acts of Parliament and Public Opinion, with Media plus Social and Economic Indicators due to be incorporated next. The other forms of policy agenda are included in this paper as future streams of the project, contingent upon research funding.

This project incorporates two alternative methods of coding. First, the manual coding of text from the code frame, cross-checked by two coders, which has been the preferred method of the *Policy Agendas Project* and, second, electronic coding from the *Benoit and Laver* programme and new *Harvard project*. It is to use both coding methods for the purpose of verification and comparison of results. At this time, electronic coding is an aspiration to be built into the project as it progresses – with Queen's Speeches and Acts of Parliament components, so far, coded manually. The expansion of the project in this regard – like a number of the other components – is dependent upon the securing of additional research funding.

In the initial project on Queen's Speeches by Peter John, the *Policy Agendas Project* code scheme was used and expansion of the *UK Policy Agendas Project, 1900-2005* will replicate this approach. While the project retains the original codes, the codebook will be revised to include UK-specific examples (drawn from each of the components of the project).

In the spirit of the original *Policy Agendas Project*, a principal aim in design of this research project is the production of datasets for future replication and expansion of the study of policy agendas in the UK by other scholars.

1. Queen's Speeches

Queen's speeches are generally annual statement of the legislative and policy programme of the UK government, given in a speech by the head of state, usually at the beginning of the parliamentary session in November. They may also appear after a General Election. The project is underway, funded by the British Academy, and the research will code this back to 1935. Future research will code this back to 1900.

2. Acts of Parliament

An “Act of Parliament” is the name for primary legislation enacted by Parliament. These come into effect with the signing of each Act by the Monarch. The UK Policy Agendas project is at present compiling a database of Acts of Parliament. To date [14 August 2006], the database is complete from 1925 to 2005. This records data in the following categories;

- (i) Year / Parliamentary Session
- (ii) Date of Royal Assent
- (iii) Chapter Number
- (iv) Short Title
- (v) Long Title

After development of the database of Acts of Parliament, each piece of legislation will be coded according to the Policy Agendas framework by two coders, working separately at the University of Manchester and at the London School of Economics. The first stage of codes are then subject to a “reconciliation” process, between the coders and mediated by the project coordinators.

At present the database records the date of “Royal Assent” [the signing of the legislation by the monarch]. In future, expansion of the database will include dates of 1st, 2nd and 3rd Readings of Parliamentary Bills [by the House of Commons and House of Lords]. It will also include details of Bills read in Parliament, but not in fact passed into law. This might at some point be extended to include the score and party breakdown of votes in Parliament.

- (vi) Date of 1st Reading
- (vii) Date of 2nd Reading
- (viii) Date of 3rd Reading
- (ix) Vote [3rd Reading], total
- (x) Vote [3rd Reading], by Party

The addition of bills to the project is likely to involve only a small percentage expansion of the project (adding basic data, rather than coding). Most bills that are introduced into parliament by the government are passed (there is no vote on the first reading, and votes on the second and third reading are –typically– on party lines, although with exceptions). In practice, the third vote is really the only vote that counts as the first and second readings and committee stages are procedural. In the UK, the number of bills introduced by the government and rejected by the House of Commons is low, we tentatively estimate less than 5%. In view of this, rejected bills are likely to be of considerable interest, and quite different from the others. This particular component of the project could become rather more complex if votes of the House of Lords were introduced. However, the 1911 and 1949 *Parliament Acts* essentially enable the House of Commons to override votes of the House of Lords in the next legislative session (so this acts as a weak check on the lower house).

3. *Command Papers*

“Command Papers” are presented to Parliament – nominally – by “Command of Her Majesty”, but in practice usually by a Government Minister. These are papers *of interest to Parliament* where tabling is not required by statute; these include consultation documents (Green Papers) or more developed policy proposals (White Papers), diplomatic papers, formal Government responses to Select Committee reports, and official reports of specific inquiries or departmental reviews. In most years, several thousand Command Papers are issued by government. In particular, (i) White Papers and (ii) Green Papers often constitute precursors to legislative activity, as an indicator of emergent policy agendas that are later observed in the form of Acts of Parliament.

This class of official publication is, therefore, a potential component in expansion of the *UK Policy Agendas* project, subject to additional funding.

4. *Parliamentary Select Committees*

Select Committees are subject-based scrutiny committees set up by the House of Commons and the House of Lords (consisting of MPs, Peers or both in the case of Joint Committees), which have powers to request ‘persons and paper’, and have a dedicated support function. Most prominently, Select Committees convene oral evidence sessions in Parliament. They publish public reports with recommendations to be considered by parliament, but have no formal powers over the legislation or administration of policy. These are therefore an indicator of parliamentary and expert policy agendas.

Non-Departmental Select Committees date from 1861, and establishment of the Public Accounts Committee. The present system of Departmental Select Committees was founded in 1979, with each Select Committee shadowing and reporting on the activities of government departments. The names and remits of Committees are – from time to time – amended to reflect changes in the organization of government departments.

The oversight activities of Select Committees are – in principle at least – non-partisan. By convention, neither government ministers nor front bench opposition spokesmen are members. Nominations to serve on Select Committees are submitted by party whips to the “Committee of Selection”, and its recommendations are then subject to a “free vote” in the House. The members of each individual Committee appoint its Chair. The Chair of a Select Committee can therefore be drawn from an opposition party.

5. *Prime Minister’s Questions*

“Prime Minister’s Questions” [PMQs] is a Parliamentary practice where the Prime Minister answers questions in the House of Commons from Members of Parliament (including the Leader of the Opposition, in addition to other backbenchers). This was introduced in 1961 and has become a weekly centrepiece of British political

life. As part of this procedure, the first question (“Number One”) – selected by a random ballot of backbench MPs – is a standard question asking about the Prime Minister’s engagements for the day. After this, MPs can ask a supplementary question that relates to Prime Ministerial responsibilities or otherwise to most aspects of Government policy.

Since 1997, PMQs have been held as a 30-minute session, every Wednesday at 12:00 GMT while the House of Commons is in session. Prior to this, PMQs was held as two 15-minute sessions, on Tuesday and Thursday. This is a prominent, and dramatic, venue for agenda-setting for the Government and Opposition. The incorporation of PMQs into the UK Policy Agendas project would employ a similar method of content analysis as for the Queen’s Speech component. It is contingent upon the securing of additional funds for the project.

6. *Statutory Instruments*

Statutory Instruments are a form of “delegated legislation” used in the British political system. These typically are tabled in Parliament by a Government minister, exercising legislative powers delegated under provisions of a preceding Act of Parliament. If this exceeds terms of the primary legislation it can be found *ultra vires* by a court and ruled invalid. These were known as “Statutory Rules and Orders” before the *Statutory Instrument Act 1946*.

Several thousand Statutory Instruments are passed each year, whereas there are 30-120 Acts of Parliament. These are no comprehensive electronic records of Statutory Instruments prior to 1987. For this reason, the project at present does not include this form of delegated legislation within the scope of its study of UK policy agendas.

7. *Public Opinion*

Gallup MIP [1959-2001]. The Gallup data is being compiled through reconciliation of the surveys reported in *British Political Opinion, 1937-2000* (King *et al* 2001) and in the original *Gallup Political and Economic Index* (1960-2001). Since 1965, the UK version of this question has asked “which would you say is the most urgent problem facing the country at the present time?”. This dataset adds the sampling dates for each survey, with notes on irregularities or peculiarities in the surveys and reporting of data.

MORI OII [1974-2006]. In addition, this project complements the Gallup MIP with published data from MORI on “other important issues”. Since 1974, MORI has asked “...what would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?” plus “...what do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?”. This dataset includes sampling dates (if available). The “most important issue” data is, at present, unavailable from MORI for surveys prior to 2001.

8. *Media*

The *Times of London* is available through the *Times Digital Archive* from 1795-1985. This includes 8 million articles spanning nearly two hundred years. It does not include the *Sunday Times*. The full text of the *Times* is available from 1985 from the *Custom Newspapers* database.

“... The Times Digital Archive is a full-image online archive of every page published by The Times [London] from 1785-1985. The text within the images is fully searchable at the article level. Users can easily search news articles, obituaries, advertising and classifieds — virtually everything that appeared in the newspaper. Results are displayed at the article level and users may view the article — or the full page upon which it appeared.” http://www.jisc.ac.uk/coll_tda.html

9. *Social and Economic Indicators*

This component of the project assembles a dataset of official and unofficial indicators for a number of social and economic variables. These include inflation (retail price index), interest rates, unemployment rate, crime, growth, exchange rates, etc.

Funding

Peter John’s original project on Queen’s Speeches was funded through an award from the British Academy. Will Jennings is the holder of a three year Postdoctoral Fellowship awarded by the British Academy, between 2005 and 2008, for a project entitled “*Vox Pop: The Regulation of Government by Public Opinion?*”.

As part of the expansion of the *UK Policy Agendas, 1900-2005* project, it is intended that additional funding is to be sought to support the indexing and coding of data on policy agendas for a number of components of the project. At present, it is anticipated that (1) *Media Coding* and (2) *Social and Economic Indicators* will be next to be added to the project, followed by (3) *Select Committees* and (4) *PMQs*. The inclusion of both (4)

Command Papers and (5) *Statutory Instruments* is likely to be deferred until the rest of the project is in place and the practical viability and value-added of their addition is evaluated.

For the first stage of expansion of the *UK Policy Agendas, 1900-2005* project there are a number of potential funding sources – via application – in the UK. These include funding schemes administered by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Leverhulme Trust and Nuffield Foundation.

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