

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 ~ *Rationality – the history of an idea*

This is a book about the quest for rationality in policy making. It is about the search for ways of disciplining the anarchy of politics, of devising an organisational architecture of decision making and institutionalising a style of analysis which would allow men to run their collective affairs more efficiently and more effectively. It is about the frustrating pursuit of an elusive vision – the vision of policy making not as the product of the accidents of power but as an ordered process whose every step is guided by the logic of seeking the greatest happiness of the greatest number – which has haunted the minds of men for 150 years or more. It is a quest shaped by the assumption that there is such a thing as rationality in policy making independent of, and indeed opposed to, the rationality of politics. It is an approach which rejects the original sin view of the world in which policy decisions will inevitably reflect the selfish, grasping and narrow interests of social classes or interest groups, in favour of an optimistic, perfectibility of man, view of the world in which improvements in the machinery of decision making can actually lead to better decisions. It is a vision of an administrative City of God, in which appropriately designed institutions and organisations will make mankind if not good, at least rational.

Specifically, this study is concerned with one particular aspect of the quest for rationality in policy making: rationality defined in terms of *coordinating* differing aspects of policy, and so bringing together the various services concerned with the same problems in order to establish a more coherent, consistent and comprehensive grip on the complex, often chaotic reality being addressed by the policy makers. It is a definition of rationality which, conveniently, had its own manifesto: the report of the Central Policy Review Staff entitled *A Joint Framework for Social Policies*¹. It is this which provided the focus for our research and a helpful starting point for exploring further the vocabulary and ideology of the quest for rationality: the subject of this introductory chapter.

This 1975 report – a Joint Approach to Social Policy (JASP), as it became known – offered both a diagnosis and a prescription. The diagnosis was that ‘many of the most intractable problems affect more than one department, and involve central government, local authorities and other bodies’. Information

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Rationality – the history of an idea*

about need and effectiveness was often lacking. So was an 'effective mechanism for determining coherent and consistent priorities'. The incentives to 'increase the efficiency of existing policies' were inadequate. The prescriptions that followed accurately mirrored the diagnosis. The future aim, the document argued, should be: (a) to improve coordination between services as they affect the individual; (b) better analysis of, and policy prescription for, complex problems – especially when they concerned more than one government department; and (c) the development of a collective view among Ministers on priorities as between different programmes, problems and groups.

The birth of JASP is analysed in more detail in chapter 4. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is enough to draw attention to the concepts which shaped the document and the words used to give them expression. In particular, and most relevantly for the theme of this book, the document shows the way in which the concept of 'coordination' – i.e. the production of 'joint' policies or measures or outputs by different services or agencies – is anchored in the wider vision of rationality in policy making. Thus coordination is seen as the rational response to the complex, untidy sprawl of social problems which do not conform neatly or conveniently to administrative boundaries and responsibilities and to the problem of resource scarcity. It is seen as a way of moving towards a set of *coherent*, *comprehensive* and *consistent* policies: further key words in the litany of rationality in policy making. Only coordinated policies, defined in terms of their coherence, comprehensiveness and consistency, can then, in turn, lead to *efficiency* and *effectiveness*. Indeed *efficiency* and *effectiveness* appear to be the criteria for judging whether or not rationality is being achieved. The implicit assumption would seem to be that the aim of public policy should be to maximise the output from any given input of resources rather than (say) maximising the number of votes for the party in power or maximising the support for the system of government. From this follows, ineluctably, the emphasis on the crucial importance of information and analysis. Governments, the document argues, need better analysed and monitored information: 'There is clearly a need for a better transdepartmental information base for social policy. This would be an essential tool for regular Ministerial reviews of social policy.' Equally, research was required to 'increase our understanding of the underlying forces at work'.

If rationality required changes in the intellectual processes of policy making, it also demanded equivalent changes in the organisational structure. For in a rational world, the organisational architecture must surely reflect its functions, that is, the promotion of a coordinated – as well as a coherent, consistent, comprehensive and analytical – approach to the production of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Rationality – the history of an idea 3

social policies. So the 1975 document proposed the creation of a new ministerial forum, which would bring together a 'group of senior Ministers' to review priorities and developments across departments. Again, this is discussed more extensively in chapter 4, as are the other specific proposals made in *A Joint Framework for Social Policies*. But what is significant, in the context of our present discussion, is the link between process and structure: stressing rationality in process inevitably leads to demands for a structure which will promote change (and, in turn, may slide into the assumption that changing structures will, in itself, promote the adoption of rational processes).

Lastly, and characteristic of the optimism which tends to sustain and encourage the quest for rationality, the 1975 document had implicit in its analysis a model of institutional behaviour based on cooperation rather than conflict or competition. Its programme of action rested on one key assumption:

that if a 'joint' and more coherent approach to social policies is to have any chance of succeeding, departments and Ministers must be prepared to make some adjustments, whether in priorities, policies, administrative practices, or public expenditure allocations. For example, a study of a problem area might show that short-run remedial measures (department A) were ineffective unless supported by long-run preventive policies (department B); this might require a shift of resources within B, or from A to B, or to B from elsewhere.

In many respects, *A Joint Framework for Social Policies* was very much a document of its time. It came at the end of a decade in which the search for rationality in policy making had been pursued with fervent persistence by successive governments, Labour and Conservative alike. It was a decade in which politics, to caricature only slightly, largely revolved around the competition between the parties to demonstrate their superior ability to deliver the goods of economic growth. It was therefore a period which saw not only a concentration on the improvement of governmental techniques and institutions, but also a stress on cooperation rather than conflict: a hesitant, uneven movement towards the creation of a British version of corporatism, with the creation of new machinery for engaging trade unions, employers and governments in the process of policy making – an attempt to substitute rational dialogue for the clash of power blocks^{2,3}.

By the time *A Joint Framework for Social Policies* was published, this era was nearing its end. Indeed its fate in part reflected the fact that while it was the intellectual child of the era of economic growth, it was born into a world of stagflation. But its vocabulary and ideology cannot be understood outside this wider context. In turn, if the explanation for the quest for organisational rationality in the decade ending in 1975 is not to be distorted by the special circumstances and preoccupations of those years, it is essential to look at the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 *Rationality – the history of an idea*

historical tradition from which it largely drew its ideas and inspiration. While it is not the object of this chapter to provide a history of the search for rationality in policy making in Britain, identifying the broad themes that have informed analysis and action over the past 150 years is an essential safeguard against stumbling into explanations too exclusively anchored in the present day.

FROM BENTHAM ONWARD

‘God forbid that any disease of the constitution of a state should be without its remedy’, wrote Jeremy Bentham in *A Fragment on Government*⁴. And it is precisely this insistence that it is human minds and human beings that shape institutions, this rejection of the view that it is institutions that shape men and have an independent life and justification of their own, which makes the Benthamite tradition a useful starting point for illustrating the intellectual history of the quest for rationality. This is not to argue that Bentham had no intellectual predecessors, or to imply that there is a direct line of intellectual descent which allows us to link Bentham with the Webbs, and beyond to the Central Policy Review Staff; the search for a rational technique of governance is obviously linked to the rational scientific method of enquiry propounded by Bacon and Pascal⁵. It is rather to identify one particular strand in British political thought – the way in which people thought about the reform of the institutions, structures, organisation and administration of government – without assuming that this was necessarily an intellectually homogeneous, consistent tradition. In a sense what links the often very disparate actors involved is not so much a coherent body of doctrine, which does not exist, but certain off-the-cuff assumptions: a temperamental and intellectual bias.

It is a bias, in the case of Bentham, towards the cheerful assumption that there is no problem of governance which is not susceptible to rational analysis. Only go back to first principles, and it is possible to design legislation and institutions accordingly. Only apply the principle of utility, and we have a yardstick by which to measure all the actions of government:

A measure of government ... may be said to be conformable to or dictated by the principle of utility, when ... the tendency which it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any which it has to diminish it.

It is an approach, therefore, which transforms problems of governance from the realm of politics seen as clashing interests, where the outcome will be determined by the balance of organised power, to the realm of technique and analysis. From applying the principle of utility, it is no great leap to trying to base policy making on cost-benefit and similar techniques: equating

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Rationality – the history of an idea 5

somewhat brutally and questionably the ‘happiness’ of the community with its purchasing power⁶.

Moreover, it is also an approach which puts the emphasis on giving institutional expression to ideas. Organisations, in the world of Bentham, embody policy aims and, in turn, are designed to promote them. Structure and process reflect and reinforce each other. When Bentham came to give thought to the organisation of government, he expressed his ideas architecturally. Given the need to maintain ‘instantaneous intercommunication’ between ministers, Bentham proposed the following arrangement:

In the apartment of the Prime Minister, from an apt position within reach of the seat occupied by him, issue thirteen conversation tubes, terminating in corresponding positions contiguous in like manner to the seats of the several ministers in their several apartments. From the apartments of each minister to the apartment of every other minister runs in like manner a conversation tube⁷.

Possibly for the first time, but certainly not for the last time, coordination is equated with communication.

The implied antithesis between politics and knowledge, between power and analysis, is one of the recurring themes in nineteenth-century reflections on the problems of government. Consider the following quotation from Henry Taylor’s *The Statesman*⁸, not one of the most radical documents of its period:

Till the government of the country shall become a nucleus at which the best wisdom in the country contained shall be perpetually forming itself in deposit, it will be, except as regards the shuffling of power from hand to hand and class to class, little better than a government of fetches, shifts, and hand-to-mouth expedients. Till a wise and constant instrumentality at work upon administrative measures (distinguished as they might be from measures of political parties) shall be understood to be essential to the government of a country, that country can be considered to enjoy nothing more than the embryo of a government . . .

Taylor’s book also adds a new theme to those previously introduced: a theme which, as we shall see, emerges fortissimo in the twentieth century. This is its insistence that good government depends on taking a long-term view. Note Taylor’s contempt for ‘hand-to-mouth expedients’. Moreover, in a passage introducing the above quotation, he analyses the reasons why this should be so, and they turn out to be remarkably similar to those given for explaining the problems of government in the 1970s: ministerial overload. ‘Every day, every hour, has its exigencies, its immediate demands; and he who has hardly time to eat his meals cannot be expected to occupy himself devising good for mankind’, wrote Taylor in 1836. So much of the argument that the problems of governance in the twentieth century can be explained solely by the growth in the scale and scope of government activities. And, indeed,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Rationality – the history of an idea

Taylor's recipe for dealing with the problems turns out to be surprisingly modern as well: to set up, within government, a body of men whose special task it would be to 'take thought for the morrow', and to bring together and direct the 'great means and appliances of wisdom which lie scattered through this intellectual country'.

More directly in the Benthamite tradition, Chadwick's career can be seen as the disciple's attempt to translate the prophet's doctrine of rationality in policy making into action⁹. In the outcome, the rationality of politics defeated Chadwick. None of his great projects were fully implemented and he himself was forced into a premature retirement. Yet even though both his great crusades – the reform of the poor laws and the sanitary revolution – failed to reach the promised land, and his hopes remained only partially fulfilled, they offer admirable illustration of the assumptions implicit in, and the intellectual bias of, the rationalist reformer in politics. They are the first of the great nineteenth-century reforms to be based on theory, information and analysis. Chadwick's 1842 Report on the *Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*¹⁰ remains a model of analysing a social problem in terms of its geographical and class distribution and the use of what was in effect, if not in name, cost-benefit analysis applied to a social problem. Moreover, Chadwick – true to the spirit of Bentham – institutionalised policy changes in organisational changes: once again, process and structure had to be brought together. His plans were based on the assumption that it would be possible to change the structure in line with its new functions, and that a central inspectorate would supply the information required to whip laggards into line. And, paradoxically, his failure to achieve this transformation – the defeat of administrative rationality by the brute force of local interest groups – remains the best justification of his underlying argument that process and structure cannot be divorced. For it was precisely his failure to achieve the structural changes which help to explain the defeat of his policy intentions and subverted the thrust of the reforms themselves.

Chadwick also had a particular obsession with the reform of local government: not surprisingly perhaps since it had been the 'baleful money interests' and the 'jobocracies' in the boroughs and counties which had frustrated his reforming ambitions. If local government was largely corrupt, he argued, it was because only those who would profit from exploiting the system had an incentive to take part in local government, while the remaining citizens rationally took refuge in apathy. So, concluded Chadwick, the sensible response was to lower the costs of participation for the majority – by paying people to go round to collect votes – and to transfer responsibility for administration from 'self-interested volunteers to 'properly qualified officers', i.e. salaried experts. The argument used by Chadwick is not only interesting

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Rationality – the history of an idea 7

in its own right, for its very modern recognition of participation costs. It also provides a bridge to the next generation of reformers: that strange alliance of Fabians and Liberal Imperialists who set out on '*The Quest for National Efficiency*'¹¹ at the beginning of the twentieth century. For in so far as this heterogeneous group can be said to have had any unifying faith, it was the belief that the crusade for greater rationality in government would be led by the 'experts'. As Beatrice Webb was to note in her diaries:

We staked our hopes on the organised working-class, served and guided, it is true, by an elite of unassuming experts who would make no claim to superior social status, but would content themselves with exercising the power inherent in superior knowledge and longer administrative experience¹².

The Webbs were, indeed, central characters in the years of critical national self-examination which preceded the outbreak of the 1914 war: years which bear an uncanny similarity to the 1960s and early 1970s, even down to the constant (unfavourable) comparison between the economic performances of Britain, on the one hand, and Germany and Japan on the other. It was a period in which all British institutions of government were critically reviewed, and found wanting when judged by the criterion of 'efficiency'. In 1902 the Webbs founded a short-lived dining club – entitled the 'Co-Efficient Club' – which brought together Haldane, Bertrand Russell, H. G. Wells and Amery, among others. According to Amery, the Co-Efficients were meant to be a 'Brains Trust or General Staff' which would work out the details on which a new 'Party of Efficiency' might appeal to the country.

The search for national efficiency, the view that policy could be divorced from politics, that expert decision making could be independent of interest group power, was a common thread in the rhetoric of the period. One further theme (which was to be taken up again in the 1970s and 1980s) was that government should be more businesslike: the model of managerial rationality in business was frequently invoked. 'After all a State is in essence a great joint stock company with unlimited liability on the part of its shareholders', Lord Rosebery argued in 1900, 'and a business depends on incessant vigilance, on method, on keeping abreast of the time'. Yet another theme, dear to Haldane in particular, was the importance of mobilising the resources of science both for production and for government. In turn, as Searle has argued, 'the claim that governments needed to improve their scientific intelligence service became confused with the belief that politics and public administration could themselves be made an exact science', in which key decisions would lie with 'experts'. The Webbs founded the London School of Economics (LSE) in part because they believed that 'social reconstructions require as much specialised training and sustained study as the building of bridges and railways'. There is a certain logical irony in the fact that the main author of *A*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Rationality – the history of an idea

Joint Framework for Social Policies (and one of the co-authors of this book) was a product of the LSE; and that, moreover, many of the ‘social reconstructions’ of the 1960s bore the imprint of the LSE influence.

A third theme was the need to bring policy logic into the design of Britain’s institutions: that institutions should be shaped not by historical accident but by the functional imperatives inherent in trying to solve certain problems. This was the logic that the Webbs sought to apply to the Poor Law in their 1909 Minority Report¹³. This was an extraordinarily Chadwickian document in its attempt to derive the design of policies and institutions from rationally applied principles. Just as Chadwick derived the recommendations of the Poor Law Report from the principle of less eligibility, so the Webbs based their plan on the ‘Principle of Prevention’. The community, through a variety of agencies, would grapple with the principal causes of destitution ‘at the incipient stages, when they are just beginning to affect one or other members of a family, long before a family as a whole has sunk into the morass of destitution’. In this crusade, volunteer workers would have a key role: ‘the modern relation between the public authority and the voluntary worker is one of systematically organised partnership under expert direction’. In short the Webbs were arguing for a comprehensive, coordinated (‘systematic’ in their vocabulary) attack on a social problem which would bring together the different strands of public policy and the actions of different social agencies to bear on one particular population group: precisely what the *Joint Framework* was to call for 66 years later.

In the case of the Minority Report, recommendations for organisational structure sprang from the ambition to improve policy outputs. But almost precisely the same themes are evident in what is perhaps the last major intellectual monument to the generation which had embarked on the quest for national efficiency at the start of the twentieth century: the 1918 *Report of the Machinery of Government Committee*¹⁴, largely the joint product of Lord Haldane and Beatrice Webb. Here again, the recommendations flow from a desire to impose a rational unity on an untidy, chaotic world. Better policy outputs will come, the Report assumed, if only the machinery is designed according to the appropriate logical principles and if only policy making is informed by adequate information. However, three specific aspects of the Haldane Report are of particular relevance to the argument of this chapter.

First, there is the emphasis on the role of Cabinet in ensuring ‘the continuous co-ordination and delimitation of the activities of the several Departments of State’. The Cabinet is seen not as a loose federation of ministers but – reflecting, as the Report itself makes clear, the wartime experience – as an Executive providing central direction to all government activities. Implicit in this is the prescriptive assumption that Cabinets should

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Rationality – the history of an idea* 9

pursue coherent and comprehensive social and economic strategies, as distinct from aggregating the demands and policies of individual departments. This is a view which may have become commonplace subsequently but which certainly represented a new definition of the peacetime role of governments in 1918¹⁵.

Second, the Haldane Report canonised the Chadwickian principle of policy flowing from information. 'It appears to us', the Report stated, 'that adequate provision has not been made in the past for the organised acquisition of facts and information, and for the systematic application of thought, as preliminary to the settlement of policy and its subsequent administration'. And while it recognised that the application of information to yield policy prescription was not as simple in 'civil administration' as in the army and the navy – because the 'exact objectives' of policy were more difficult to define – it proposed that 'better provision should be made for enquiry, research and reflection'. Policy analysis – for what is that multihued activity if not 'the organised acquisition of facts and information' and the 'systematic application of thought'? – had arrived in Whitehall.

The third, and last strand, in the Haldane Report was the recommendation for a new, more rigorous principle for distributing functions between government departments. Defining departments according to 'the nature of the service rendered to the community' – rather than according to 'the class of persons dealt with' – would yield a total of ten departments (two fewer than in Bentham's scheme, but otherwise similar in many respects). One advantage of such an arrangement would be that it would encourage the concentration of expertise: 'the acquisition of knowledge and the development of specialised capacity'. One inevitable disadvantage, the Report conceded, was that there might be overlap between departments. 'The work of the Education Department, for example, may incidentally trench on the sphere of Health . . . Such incidental overlapping is inevitable, and any difficulties to which it may give rise must in our opinion be met by systematic arrangements for the collaboration of Departments jointly interested in particular spheres of work.' Thus the stress on the importance of coordination – or collaboration – followed logically from the emphasis on functional specialisation. If the organisation of government were to follow the lines of expertise, then special attention would have to be paid to the problems of coordinating different kinds of expertise.

It is no accident that the Haldane Report's celebration of rationality as an organising principle of government came at the end of a world war, and at a time when Lloyd George was heading a coalition government. For not only had the war provided the precise definition of 'national efficiency' which was so conspicuously absent in peacetime – i.e. the ability to mobilise national

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30900-4 - Joint Approaches to Social Policy: Rationality and practice

Linda Challis, Susan Fuller, Melanie Henwood, Rudolf Klein, William Plowden, Adrian Webb, Peter Whittingham and Gerald Wistow

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Rationality – the history of an idea*

resources to maximum effect in the pursuit of military objectives – but Lloyd George himself had a congenital bias towards coalition politics. Even before 1914 he had flirted with the idea of trying to set up a coalition government. For the quest for rationality in policy making reflects, as argued earlier, a suspicion of ‘normal’ politics. Its inbuilt assumption is that there is a rationality over and above the policies produced by the clash of party competition, and that there is a way of rationally defining the national interest independent of selfish group or class interests.

The point emerges clearly when we consider the ideas of one of the key figures linking the debates about public policy in the inter-war period, from 1918 to 1939, and in the 1960s: Harold Macmillan. It was Macmillan who, as Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, instigated many of the changes in government which provided the background to such documents as *A Joint Framework*. But it was the young Macmillan who sketched out much of the underlying ideology in the 1930s when, as a leading member of the heterodox movement of rebellion against the conventional wisdom of monetarist economics, he set out his ideas for a planned economy in *The Middle Way* published in 1938¹⁶. In a chapter entitled ‘*Coordination*’ he sketched out the institutional devices for achieving the ‘harmonious’ coordination of the nation’s economic policies: in particular, the creation of a National Economic Council which, ‘with all the facts before it’ would formulate ‘a comprehensive plan for general guidance’ in pursuit of a ‘common aim’ and a ‘single national policy’. Here then, we find all our thematic key words and concepts: the stress on collecting facts, the need for comprehensive policies, the invocation of ‘coordination’, the identification of rationality with planning and the underlying assumption that it was possible rationally to devise policies which would be harmonious (and therefore, by implication, politically acceptable) because in the national interest in a curious conflation of Benthamism and corporatism. They will provide the leitmotifs in the next section, where we consider the more immediate background to the publication of *A Joint Framework*.

RATIONAL POLICIES FROM RATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The second world war, like the first, gave new impetus to the concept of rationality as the pursuit of well-defined national goals which cut across party lines, interest groups and class conflicts, and which could be pursued by coalition governments. It broadened the experience of planning in general, left a legacy of consensus about the desirability of social planning and created, in government itself, an infrastructure of planning machinery which to a large extent survived the war period itself¹⁷.

In particular, the plans worked out during the period of the wartime