

History and Policy Transcript – BBC Radio 3 Free Thinking

Overview: As a new book calls on historians to take a more active role in debates over global inequality, climate change and governance, Rana Mitter is joined by *The History Manifesto*'s co-author, David Armitage, Chris Skidmore MP and historian, and Lucy Delap, Director of History and Policy to discuss how and when history lost its place at the top table, the uses of micro-histories versus the long duree, and how new technology to handle big data might harness them both to help decision-takers and policy makers.

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First broadcast on Wednesday 22nd October 2014 at 22:00.

RANA MITTER ...We start with an intriguing suggestion that the answer to our problems might lie not in looking back forty years, but possibly four hundred or more. As our politicians put together their manifestos for next spring, setting out their policy stalls for the next five years, the historian David Armitage of Harvard University has put out his own call to arms for policy makers. It's co-authored with Jo Guldi and it is titled *The History Manifesto*.

The book argues that if we want to rethink to our stance on policy problems in the future, then politicians need to hear more from historians and historians need to speak more to decision makers. Earlier, David Armitage joined me down the line from Cambridge, Massachusetts, and with me in the studio was Lucy Delap, Director of the organisation History and Policy, and Chris Skidmore, a historian whose most recent book is *Bosworth, the Rise of the Tudors* but he is also the Conservative MP for Kingswood.

I started by asking David Armitage why a history manifesto and why now.

DAVID ARMITAGE I think there is currently a moment in the affairs of the world which we would call a crisis of short-termism. The world seems to be run on time-scales of about five years, at most – a general electoral cycle. It's frustrating as a historian - and I think all historians would feel this – that our perspective which is a perspective that goes into a deeper past beyond fifty years, a hundred years, or even a thousand years, doesn't get talked about in the general formation of policy. So we're standing by, watching the world go to hell in a hand basket and realising that there is something that historians could say to those problems. This is something that I think should impel us all in the history profession to try to get our voices back into the public sphere.

RANA MITTER You sound very incensed there, David. Is there something specific in recent current affairs that has stimulated that thought in your mind?

DAVID ARMITAGE I think the biggest issue is the problem of climate change. Obviously the debates about this have been fraught in recent years but the scientific consensus is very clear about the man-made nature of climate change, at least over the last two hundred years, if not longer. Until recently, historians have not played very much of a role in that debate. It has been left largely to the climate scientists themselves without any sense of how climate change might have emerged historically from certain parts of the world, certain classes of people, and certain activities of human beings such

as the Industrial Revolution or Imperialism. There's a lot that historians could bring to a debate like that, that really hasn't been put on the table, at least not systematically, in the broader public debates about climate change which are often managed at the national level. These are, again, often cross-cut by electoral politics and very short cycles when we need to be thinking on cycles of hundreds or even thousands of years. [We need to think about this both backwards and forwards], backwards to work where climate change came from and who was responsible for it, and then forwards to imagine what we might do about it in various possible futures.

RANA MITTER Lucy, you are Director of an organisation called History and Policy, was it that sort of absence of historians in the public sphere that stimulated you to take on that particular organisation?

LUCY DELAP Absolutely. It was the sense that there were certain disciplines that were at the top table talking to the policy makers - economics is certainly the one that comes in for the most flack in *The History Manifesto*. They had specialised in offering snazzy graphics, visualisations, charts that seem to give obvious answers. But we felt it was a false economy just to go to those disciplines when history, as David says, is the one that can go back a long time...

RANA MITTER ...or a false economist, perhaps? But what are we talking about specifically here, Lucy? We've had the example of climate change but is it really only these big long-term problems, or is there something in the day-to-day smaller change of policy that historians can say something about?

LUCY DELAP History and Policy, which has been running for twelve years now, represents the work of five hundred historians who are members of our network and we've published hundreds of pieces from them. These publications range across things like the regulation of alcohol during the gin craze in the late eighteenth century, looking at Gladstone's licensing laws in that late nineteenth century, all of which could feed into debates around binge drinking and unit pricing of alcohol. So it is highly relevant today.

RANA MITTER Why is knowing about eighteenth century gin drinking going to be relevant to a very different twentieth century world?

LUCY DELAP Partly it's a sense of the recurrence of the idea of problematic drinking and identifying that these things recur. As historians we don't tend to want to talk about recurrent patterns, we want to say that they occur in different ways and different contexts, and let's look at what the government and public figures of the day had to say about it and what kinds of policy options worked. There's a huge appetite in government for learning from those kinds of perspectives.

RANA MITTER That's a challenge I'm going to have to take up as we have Chris Skidmore here who is a very well trained historian but also an elected member of parliament. We've heard two distinguished historians here, essentially knocking at the door of government saying they have great stuff they want to bring you. Do you feel that that historical perspective on policy making is something that is lacking and is something from which you politicians could gain?

CHRIS SKIDMORE Absolutely. I started off trying to train as a historian. I left my DPhil (this was before History and Policy was set-up) fairly disenchanted because history is becoming ever more specialised. So if you wanted to get a leg up on the research exercise you needed to study something like 4th century Bulgaria. If we can look at broader patterns, then that is extremely welcome – I remember sitting on the Health Select Committee talking about alcohol pricing and raising the fact that minimum alcohol pricing was introduced in something like 1797 and it turned out to be a

catastrophic failure. Or for instance Education, I remember in the Conservative Party we had a grammar schools debate and I used to tell some of my colleagues who were obsessed with having a grammar school in every town that the last time it happened was in 1553 and maybe it's time to move on and look for more productive ways to provide education in the 21st century. I do welcome the role of the past. As a historian, there are so many qualifications that we do need to add as well – that the history we are studying is not just the history of the past but the history of the past that survives, the data that we use, making sure that we don't compromise our own profession by trying to play the politicians game. I also don't want to see historians being used or abused by politicians. I think that is very important.

The role that history can play is create narratives and narrative is incredibly in framing policies in Education, looking at free school meals for pupils for instance. The Conservative party deciding very firmly that it was going to try and set-up a pupil premium and we went about creating graphs to show the inequalities that were rising between free school meal pupils and non-free school meals pupils. Then that led to the policy so I think historians can play a really important role creating those narratives.

LUCY DELAP There's a lot in David Armitage and Jo Guldi's book about disrupting narratives. They portray history as a very subversive force and that's been one of the interesting things in our work of saying to historians 'Yes, go in and deconstruct their clichés'. We find that policy makers don't only want that, they really want the constructive so we have to guide historians to get them to make some firm policy recommendations.

RANA MITTER David, there seems to be a bit of a change from the past because in your book you made the point that historians used to have a lot more input into politics than perhaps they do now. You've quote R. H. Tawney, well known socialist historian who was sent off to China, Beatrice and Sidney Webb before that, so are you suggesting that there has been a golden age in the past when more history was included in policy and that we've fallen away from that?

DAVID ARMITAGE It may not be a golden age but there was certainly a time when historians were at the top table as Lucy said, and the example you've given of R.H. Tawney is a good one. R.H. Tawney was a great Fabian historian, very well known for his work on the enclosure movement of sixteenth century England. That seems like a world away from China in the 1930s until you realise that international organisations like the League of Nations were extremely interested in the prospects for land reform and what was going to happen to the peasantry of China in the 1930s. They were transferable skills that someone like Tawney had from his deep immersion in in the English history of the change of the landscape and peasants' relationship to that landscape, which were easily transportable to somewhere like China.

RANA MITTER I could be slightly mischievous and point out that in the 1930s the League of Nations could have found many distinguished Chinese historians to comment on China and decided to bring someone from the west instead, but perhaps it was a different time.

DAVID ARMITAGE Exactly. That's why it wasn't a golden age.

RANA MITTER Chris, I don't think we should underplay the fact that historians in parliament are actually a small but rather significant group today. It looks like a rather friendly cross-party affair. I had this vision of you, Tristram Hunt, Kwasi Kwarteng, and Jesse Norman, all of whom have recently written books of history, all sitting in the commons library swapping footnotes. Does that have any basis in fact?

CHRIS SKIDMORE It is very true. Late at night we have divisions that can go on until ten or eleven o'clock. You'll often find various historians sitting on various tables. I'll often go out to Rory Stewart and ask how he is getting on with his book on the Marches and he may ask me how I'm getting on with my book on Richard III. There's a sort of self-help group of MPs who are getting on with stuff in their spare time, certainly.

RANA MITTER David, that idea of Members of Parliament sitting late at night working on their footnotes reminds us that the historical profession, particularly in the west, has become something very different in recent decades. I do think we need to understand a bit more of the recent history of history – of how the writing of professional history has developed. You've suggested that a key year in this, as with so many other things, was 1968. In and around that year [you mark] a real change in the way that professional historians began to write history. What did you mean by that?

DAVID ARMITAGE 1968 is a placeholder date for a set of changes that take place in the late 60s and early 70s. There is an expanding number of universities on both sides of the Atlantic for instance, creating larger numbers of historians, increasing production of PhDs at the same time to potentially staff that new places in the new universities, greater competition among graduate students to be original and find and say something new in a deeply crowded field. This helped to push history to become ever more focussed and this coincided with the various kinds of protest movements that young historians and other students joined in the 60s and early 70s around gender and ethnic identity. The reconstruction of the histories of forgotten communities and overlooked peoples became immensely important and the convergence of all of those simultaneously pushed historians deeper into the archives to tell untold stories and become more professional. In some ways this made them more cut off from the really big questions around them and in *The History Manifesto* we diagnose that as the beginning of the movement which lasted about thirty to forty years until the early part of the twentieth century. It was a very important movement, hugely valuable both for history itself...

RANA MITTER ...but with some unexpected after-effects in terms of what it has done to the profession. Lucy, is that a reasonable position - that from the 1960s you get an era when the range of history in terms of the history of women, non-European groups, disabled, and a whole variety of groups whose stories hadn't been written, came into the academy but at the same time the stories told about them became narrower and narrower and much more specialist?

LUCY DELAP I disagree with that. David has done a great job setting out an overarching sense of where history is going but in some sense [he has given] a narrative of the long golden age or the long view, and we move into the period where history is all about short periods and now David and Jo are saying we're moving back into the *longue durée* again. I think that we run the risk of riding rough shod over how important those changes in the academy were [by viewing only] a picture of history that he has portrayed of a proliferation of different stories and a lack of any synthesis or clear big narratives. It was an absolutely crucial way of bringing in these other perspectives. The changing academy and the rise of larger numbers of women, people of working class origins, ethnic minorities is one of the great success stories of the kind of history we write. We mustn't throw out the baby with bath water here.

RANA MITTER David, were you perhaps overdrawing the situation there?

DAVID ARMITAGE I agree with absolutely everything that Lucy says. We're not arguing for macro history against micro history, but we are always up for asking the big question that arises from any

particular case study, that's what I say to my own graduate students. It's about integrating the macro and micro, the long view and the short term that's crucial.

LUCY DELAP But remember, David, that women's history has had its own big questions: what is the nature of patriarchy, and does it persist across all human time? I think that those big questions have sometimes led us into real dead-ends and these are not always easy concepts. Yes, they're big synthesising concepts but they're not ones that always prove very workable for historians.

RANA MITTER I wonder, Chris, if historians and politicians talked less to each other during that period, not because there was less politics in history but because there was more of it – actually, the need explicitly for historians to go to politicians and vice versa because history was more political.

CHRIS SKIDMORE Yes, I think some of the leading lights in the historical debates that were taking place in the 70s and 80s were instinctively to the left of the political scale – Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson, fantastic historians but probably not people you could do political business with at that time. History is still incredibly political - the revisionist school that came up to help depoliticise history, to get back into the archives and challenge historians' own emotional arguments to say that sometimes these narratives that are being created are the product of the historian's own imagination. Politics is usually 30 years behind the time, I find, so we're just catching up with the revisionist school and the evidence-based policy making that took place in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, and now it's reaching the political narratives.

RANA MITTER You sound so full of wisdom Chris that I'm going to have to reveal something to the listeners at the home who can't see you. You're extremely fresh-faced and that's because you're only actually born in 1981 and came into the historical profession about a decade or so ago. Did you feel that you came at it in a different way than your tutors and supervisors who had come up through the 70s and 80s moment? You are a historian of a very different generation.

CHRIS SKIDMORE Although I still believe in the broader narratives, I do write history to get more people engaged in the subjects and I feel that narrative history is the best way for me to do that.

RANA MITTER But you are a details guy. Your work on Essex and Amy Robsart are based in deep reading of sources are very detailed and technical in places.

CHRIS SKIDMORE We still live very much in a golden age. There are still things to be discovered and that's why we need more people to engage in history. I hope that the more that's discovered through legal records will help piece together a mosaic where we will be able to understand the human society better. I studied Tudor history and fifteenth century. I'm fascinated by the anatomy of power and how individuals decide to create power basis, which is not too divorced by what happens in the House of Commons – which in a sense is a court, politicians still chase after patronage, and they defect when they don't get the rewards they want. It's the same thing in the fifteenth century as it is now and I think if people could recognise that we'd move forward.

RANA MITTER David, we're hearing a story here about the 1960s where the historian is beginning to leave the world of policy making, perhaps because it's part of the patriarchy and historian is finding her place elsewhere. Who is it taking her place at that point? Is it the economist?

DAVID ARMITAGE It's often the economist, especially from the 1970s. This is a worldwide phenomenon that has been widely documented, not just in Europe and North America but in Latin America and developing countries. Economists became very good at condensing the results of their research and putting them into easily digestible forms such as graphs and tables but also in microwaveable policy pellets that could be given to politicians to effect action. I often like to say that

other social scientists prefer parsimony, they like to really boil things down into one bullet point whereas historians like profligacy. We like lots and lots of details and explanation, so that made us somewhat cumbersome beasts in the evolutionary world.

RANA MITTER Lucy, if you're running a group called History and Policy, the policy part is important – politicians are busy people, they have to make life or death decisions, literally. Telling them that there are seven different sources of causation and that one has to go back to the footnotes may be accurate but it's not helpful.

LUCY DELAP Let's think about the point of insertion here. History and Policy has found that one of the key places in which we get a very enthusiastic audience is in Whitehall rather than Westminster. Policy makers amongst the civil service are hugely interested in learning about both the history of their own institutions and about how policy frameworks looked in the past. We've been experimenting with not just bringing the work of historians to them but actually in dialogue. This is key. It very much fits with *The History Manifesto's* call for critical and engaged history.

RANA MITTER Can we have an example? You're talking about dialogue, what issues is the dialogue taking part in and where does history make a difference?

LUCY DELAP Let me give you an example. We ran a very successful workshop at the treasury several months ago where we brought to the policy makers not just the issue – the issue was where should London's third airport be?, an issue that was hugely contentious in the early 1970s – but we also brought the sources. We got policy makers to sit and look through the ministerial memos, press coverage, feasibility reports and said to them 'what decision do you think was made?' and then to discuss what decisions were actually made at several points in time both before and after the oil crisis.

RANA MITTER This is Maplin Sands as a precursor to Boris Island.

LUCY DELAP Exactly. A very clear parallel. I think this is one of the ways in which we can respond to *The History Manifesto's* call for us to think about the future. As historians we can ask what did the future look like to people in the past and how did they respond to it.

RANA MITTER But it sounds as if you're getting into the corridors of power and it's all going very well. What's the point of a history manifesto if you've already won?

LUCY DELAP I certainly think that there's more work to be done. Critically engaged history? Yes, our policy-facing historians do that but there's many historians who feel that they shouldn't. I have to say that I want to make a plea for that kind of history. There are many different ways of being a historian and it's not only engaged policy or political history that should be celebrated. We should also be advocates for the otherness of the past.

RANA MITTER Chris, isn't the nature of political language these days that an economists graph will always impress politicians more than a historical example? In the end it is the appearance of a neat solution. It's very attractive to people who have to make decisions that need to seem informed but need to be put into action quickly.

CHRIS SKIDMORE Yes, and politicians have short attention spans. I sit on the Number 10 Downing Street Policy Board and all policies that are submitted have to be boiled down to two pages. We receive so many submissions that you can't get across what you're trying to achieve in two pages [you have to] ask is the policy worth pursuing at all. Particularly when you're trying to win votes and

come up with policies that are attractive to the electorate. If you can't say what they are on the doorstep you may as well forget them.

RANA MITTER Isn't the fact that lots of policies we can think of do demand much more than three, four, or five pages and if we're really prisoners of a system in which two pages max then doesn't that prove that policy making has got itself into a dead-end?

CHRIS SKIDMORE Going back to what Lucy said about Whitehall rather than Westminster: it's not a new phenomenon but if you look at it like the sea, Whitehall carries on with the long flowing deep-channelled policies – we're living in a technocratic age now and the politicians at the top are floating around trying to present ideas that the electorate can see and claim ownership of, so there might be a two-tiers policy developing where politicians try to grab what is tangible, what is going to appear on the front-page of the paper, and the civil servants carrying on with the spade work that is going to assure that the country isn't going to fall to pieces.

RANA MITTER David, how does one very recent development change the role of the historian engaging with policy. I'm thinking here of big data and the fact that we have digitised sources, digitised archives and stores of information that are accessible and processible in ways that even fifteen years ago we couldn't have dreamed of. Does that make a difference?

DAVID ARMITAGE It makes a huge difference to what we can do as historians. I also think it gives us another activity that historians can add to broader public debate. We all know that big data is being collected on us at every moment of our lives. It's being manipulated by big corporations and by governments, and some recent advances in recent digital historical work and the historical analysis, visualisation, and processing of data for asking historical questions and producing historical narratives will give us a critical purchase on this rather scary development - which is going on all around us but isn't often historicised. As you say, it is very recent and it's beginning to overwhelm, for instance, the national archives in the United States – who are collecting pieces of electronic data from the email systems of the US government and doesn't really know what to do with it and hasn't even processed most of its nineteenth century paper records yet. So it is both an opportunity for historians and somewhat of a crisis for archivists who look after the materials as well. We need to look after materials as well and find ways to do what some digital historians call distant reading and look for bigger patterns in the data which will then tell us where to dig down and which questions to ask, which archives and materials we should be focussing our attention on in this great sea of material that is overwhelming us.

RANA MITTER Chris?

CHRIS SKIDMORE I worry sometimes if we'll end up inadvertently going into a dark age where it will be impossible to analyse all this data. Everything you do will have been just a sample and the danger with sampling ensures that somebody else will be able to create different sample to prove you wrong.

RANA MITTER So it's cherry picking problem? You can prove anything you want with statistics and you can prove anything you want with historical case studies?

CHRIS SKIDMORE Yes, and it happens regularly in the House of Commons that two different politicians from both sides of the political divide can take a single fact and turn it to their advantage.

RANA MITTER I wonder, Lucy, if that doesn't create a particular problem that comes from this question of history and policy – not the organisation but the concept. The fact is that most of us have the perception that the academy, like many other parts of the public sector, does have more people

that lean towards the left. Isn't it the case that professional historians are going to come up with solutions and analyses that broadly lean towards the left rather than the right?

LUCY DELAP I think it's perfectly possible to work in a non-partisan way which History and Policy does. When we have had events in parliament we've found the same kind of receptivity on both sides of the political spectrum.

RANA MITTER Is that because you choose non-partisan questions though?

LUCY DELAP No. One of my questions for *The History Manifesto* is why is this critical history and why do we not call it politicised history. I do think that is the implication of some of the arguments in it. The politics of the historical record are immensely complex and normally we can't reduce it down to left and right – those are quite often anachronistic categories. Historians can always have their views, sometimes they bring them to the table but the overall profession as a whole doesn't have any political bias.

RANA MITTER David, can we make that separation that Lucy has put forward – as historians we do one thing, as political actors we can separate that?

DAVID ARMITAGE I would agree absolutely with what Lucy just said. To answer her question as to whether critical equals politicised: I think it would be politicised not in the sense of party political or sitting on a political spectrum but to realising that at least one of things we do as historians is to precisely to shake our masters and leaders out of the complacency that often comes with...

RANA MITTER Is that a complacency of the left and of the right?

DAVID ARMITAGE Absolutely. It can be. It's not a party matter by any means. To go back to the examples that Lucy was giving earlier, to talk about the eighteenth or nineteenth century in relation to alcohol policy can allow us to see the paths not taken or the alternative policies that were tried in the past but may not have been in the right circumstances.

RANA MITTER You mentioned corporations earlier in one of your answers, would you include trade unions in the same sort of category of people who need to be educated?

DAVID ARMITAGE I think everyone needs to be educated. History is not just something for professional historians. It is for every thinking member of the public and that has always been the mission of history for nearly two thousand years – to allow not just rulers but citizens to orientate themselves in the present with the knowledge of the past to help them think about the future.

RANA MITTER Many thanks to David Armitage, Lucy Delap, and Chris Skidmore.