

# Five minutes with Margaret MacMillan: On historians, politicians, and their duty to history

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/margaret-macmillan-on-history/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/margaret-macmillan-on-history/)

3/17/2016

*What is history for and is it dangerous when politicians use it to justify their actions? Can historians explain the past to the public when their careers depend on being published in ways that are inaccessible to non-academics? And how will the history of our times be written: is the “age of information” producing too many tweets and not much else? [Margaret MacMillan](#) shares her views in an interview with Artemis Photiadou.*



**The media gives us the impression we are going through terrible times: the financial gloom deepens, the migrant situation is uncontrollable, the two main parties are about to implode. Do we have it that bad from a historical perspective? How can history help?**

I think what history can help you to do is to make sense of your present situation; to remind you that there were other situations like it in the past; and to help you formulate the right questions. One of the big problems with the situation today, for example of migrants, is that there are so many myths about how many migrants there are in Britain.

People believe in numbers that are simply not true. And we learn from history how dangerous such beliefs can be when people hold them very strongly. And so one of the things you can do is challenge those myths and history can give you useful parallels. But I don't think history will

help you predict the future. It may help you like a sign on a road that says “dangerous curve ahead” and makes you drive more carefully.



**George Galloway recently [compared](#) his newfound relationship with Nigel Farage to that of Churchill and Stalin. Having [written](#) on the uses and abuses of history, do you consider such comparisons to be wrong or dangerous?**

Galloway's comparison is completely wrong because it was a different sort of world then. The British were fighting for their lives, it was a matter of defeating fascism, and Churchill chose to align himself with the Soviet Union when the stakes were very high. For Galloway to use Churchill on this one is really to justify what is a short-term political pact in this way. I am constantly aware of the ways history is being misused by politicians who try and justify what they are doing. George Bush Jr. when he invaded Iraq compared himself to Churchill, compared himself to President Truman, and tried to wrap himself in the mantle of people of the past. We have to be very, very suspicious of these comparisons.

Where history is dangerous is when you get leaders using historical grievances or playing on memories of past glory. And so you have Putin, for example, calling on the Russian past, saying to the Russian people “we were once a great people” – and actually compares himself to Peter the Great. That's very dangerous because it's giving people a sense that there is a clear example in the past and if they just follow it, and if they just follow the “great leader”, they will have the same sort of things happen as happened in the past. This is very dangerous.

**In [History's People](#) you focus on leaders and their personalities. Do you see current individuals, perhaps**

**more recently Boris Johnson, as defining the trajectory of British politics, or is that decided at Party level?**

I think it's both. Individuals operate in a certain environment and have to deal with certain constraints. But I think what we are seeing very clearly is that personalities do matter. I mean Boris Johnson is a very compelling personality and that's why the Prime Minister and those for Britain remaining in the EU were so concerned when he came out against it – because he has a way of attracting public attention and calling attention to himself. Donald Trump is also a phenomenon, and his personality is something American politics has to content with. Now his successful campaign comes out of a dysfunctional Republican party, and it comes out of growing discontent with a lot of Americans of a certain age who really don't like what's been happening to the United States and to their own status. But someone like Trump gives voice to those fears. It takes someone who is really good at giving a voice to particular concerns, so I do think personalities can make a difference.

**The means through which we communicate are changing and records fall through the cracks – UK government emails between 1993 and 2003 went unrecorded. Will this change in sources take away the force of history, in that future historians might never know exactly what happened?**

Well we never know exactly what happened and we are always at the mercy of our sources. And we have to be inventive in using them. There are whole periods of history when there is actually not that much material. Look at the Middle Ages – we have some written records but we don't have a lot, particularly for the Early Middle Ages. I think the problem for historians writing the history of our times – certainly from about 1990 onwards when you have the electronic revolution really taking force – is that there is going to be both too much material, and not enough that's very useful. And so you will have lots of tweets – if those are saved – but what there is not going to be are the long letters people used to write to each other. Even with emails people are really cautious about what they write. And we are not going to find as frank government documents either. Ever since WikiLeaks and the Snowden leaks, governments have become very cautious about what they will commit to on any sort of record.



This is going to be a real problem not just for historians but for government. Because when they will want to go back 10 years, saying why did we do that policy, they are not going to be able to and that really is going to be a problem. The people who made the snap decisions in 2008 in Washington and in London to deal with the economic crisis and the meltdown of financial institutions – well 10 years later we are probably facing similar problems and I don't think policy-makers are going to be able to go back and see what they were thinking then, and what can help them deal with these issues now.

**Do historians have an obligation to explain history to the public and if so, how do we reconcile that with the university system in which they operate – where they are expected to publish in certain ways, and so history often ends up behind paywalls the public cannot access?**

I know – this is a real problem and I feel strongly that we are paid by the public, and we have an obligation to explain what we are doing to the public. And I don't mean that in a patronising way. I simply think we ought to be able to explain what we are doing. I also think it's very important for historians to explain what they are doing and explain it clearly. That doesn't mean dumbing it down but simply explain it to an interested audience. Because if we don't do it others will, and we need to be careful. History is written by an awful lot of people and some of it is not very good. If we – and I don't mean just historians in universities but historians who take the profession seriously and treat evidence seriously – are not writing history people can read, then that history will be written by people with access, by political leaders and others with political, social, or cultural agendas – and it may not be good history.

At the same time there are real pressures, particularly on young academics. I have reached a stage in my career where it doesn't matter what I write because my promotion doesn't depend on anything. But I think it's very hard on

young academics because their promotion does depend on being published in certain ways, by certain presses, in certain journals. On the other hand, there is a recognition that universities ought to be communicating more with the public and so HEFCE and REF try to work in the notion of impact, but that's very difficult to measure. How do you measure impact? We have all become a bit cynical about it frankly, but I can see what they are trying to do. But the competing pressures of public funders who think we ought to be looking outwards and making an impact and the criteria of the profession which tend to value certain kinds of intellectual productions over others remain a real problem. So academics think if they will be spending time writing something they might as well do it for something that will advance their careers.

**How about the composition of the profession – for example there are five black historians in UK universities. How does diversity matter when it comes to historical investigation?**

It matters in the sense that all professions should reflect the composition of the population from which they are drawn. But black is an all-encompassing term and doesn't tell us much. What we should be asking is why people from certain socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic groups don't choose certain professions. Is that because they are getting the wrong message at school or is it because of cultural factors which value some professions more than others? We need to know a lot more and that's where sociologists and anthropologists can help us. I also don't think that the history of particular peoples needs to be done by people who look like those peoples. And I never felt as a woman that I shouldn't do diplomatic and military history because more men were doing it than women. And I would like to think that men shouldn't feel that they shouldn't do women's history. I mean, most of what we study in history are people who are dead. And so you could argue since we are not dead...



**Are by definition disqualified...**

Exactly! Historical investigation is historical investigation. But it is a problem when you don't get people from particular segments of society because such people are role models and encourage others to come along and add to the diversity of voices, and that's important.

**Does the way we've divided disciplines combined with the lack of collaboration between historians and other experts, deprives a greater understanding of the past?**

Absolutely. I think these divisions and the increasing professionalisation of academic disciplines do that. At the same time, we are all very conscious there are many barriers between us and so there are great attempts being made to set interdisciplinary seminars and encourage projects which bring together people from a multitude of disciplines. We need to talk to each other. It used to be the case that political scientists used to talk to historians as what they did was often very similar. The gap between us has grown and that's unfortunate. Because you could argue historians don't think enough about theory and about structural issues whereas perhaps political scientists think too much about the theory and structural issues and not enough about what actually happened, and that's when we need to talk to each other. That's very important and it does worry me, because we both lose.

**So should historians be seeking to advise government?**

I think we should be talking to government for the same reasons we should be talking to the public, in that we are being paid by the public. Governments often want to talk to historians. There was a very interesting article in Foreign Policy a couple of years ago which looked at whom policy-makers wanted to talk to when making complicated decisions about the world and top of the list were historians. And in fact fairly far down the list were international

relations theorists – which I found very interesting. What policy-makers want are people who know the history, the culture, the language. The other side of the problem is whether governments want to hear when we are talking to them. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. It seems to me from all that's come out from the invasion and occupation of Iraq that the key policy-makers in both Washington and London did not really want to hear those who knew the area.

### **We will soon be called to make an era-defining decision in the EU referendum. Can history help people navigate through such an event?**

One way it could help is to remind people the reasons for making the European Union in the first place. With the passage of generations, I think we have forgotten. I haven't because I am older, but we have forgotten generally just what the state of Europe was in 1945, and that there were two world wars that very nearly destroyed this continent and its civilisation. We have perhaps forgotten how necessary the European Union was. The EU has become like an old pair of slippers – it's around and you don't much like it and one day you throw them away and then you realise you actually needed them. That's what worries me. I think what historians might also be able to do – and it's true of other academics as well – is keep on trying to puncture some of the myths. What's really unfortunate in these discussions around the EU is that they are mixed with fears about immigrants. And fears of being overwhelmed by refugees and fears about asylum seekers. The questions somehow all got mixed up. There are always figures floating around but the problem is getting people to listen.



---

*Margaret MacMillan spoke at the LSE Literary Festival 2016, and a podcast of the event is available [here](#).*

#### **About the Author**

**Margaret MacMillan** is Professor of International History and Warden of St Antony's College, University of Oxford. Her latest book, *History's People: Personalities and the Past* was published in 2015 (House of Anansi Press). She is also the author of *The War that Ended Peace: How Europe abandoned peace for the First World War* (Profile Books, 2013), *The Uses and Abuses of History* (Profile Books, 2009), and *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* (John Murray, 2001); published in revised form as *Paris, 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (Random House, 2002). For a full list of publications see [here](#).



**Image credit: Nathan Nelson CC BY-NC-SA; Daniel Kulinski CC BY-NC-SA; zizybalooah CC BY-NC; Svet Ivantchev CC BY-NC-SA**