

The LSE's 'Influential Academics' project: How a number of the School's personalities have contributed directly to political thought and policy-making

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*The LSE has a long history of influencing political thought and policy. The [British Government at LSE](#) has embarked on a [project](#) to showcase the numerous scholars, from Beatrice and Sidney Webb to Richard Layard, that have had an important impact on the state and society. In this article, **Tony Travers** provides an overview of the project's purpose and progress.*



LSE academics have long been involved in the development of political ideas and policy, a form of activity which would today be seen as 'engagement' or 'knowledge exchange'. From the School's creation in 1895, its staff and students have been concerned with knowledge applied to public policy issues and/or to the furtherance of the philosophy of government. Today's politicians and public officials continue to have regular involvement with many of LSE's researchers.

In a world where the word 'academic' is used to mean 'scholarly' and, by other people, 'not directly useful', it is important to show how the activities undertaken in universities are relevant to those who pay the taxes that underpin (at least part of) the cost of higher education. [The LSE's 'Influential Academics' project](#) is intended to show how a number of the School's personalities have contributed directly to political thought and policy. This project, an element in the HEIF-funded BG@LSE engagement process, now includes interviews (mostly with LSE people) about the activities of past and contemporary academics who have been involved with political thought, government and policy-making in Britain.

The work completed so far provides only a modest snapshot of what has been achieved by LSE academics since the end of the 19th century: many key figures from the past have not yet been covered, while contemporary figures have (for obvious reasons) been more easily included. Additional interviews will be added in future.

Beatrice and Sidney Webb, along with Graham Wallas, are featured. As founders of the School, LSE can be seen as an example of their desire to influence policy by taking direct steps to create a new institution with a particular and practical objective. The Webbs also helped found the Fabian Society. Their gradualism can be measured by the fact the LSE's Old Building has a foundation stone laid by King George V. The monarch's endorsement of the (then relatively new) London School of Economics and Political Science shows how Britain's Establishment has always been flexibly able to embrace non-revolutionary new ideas.

The 'Inter-War Years' are represented by William Beveridge, Friedrich Hayek and RH Tawney. Beveridge is acknowledged as the founder of the Welfare State, an extraordinary achievement which affects the lives of everyone in Britain today. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* warned of the danger of the [tyranny](#) which, in his view, inevitably resulted from government control of economic [decision-making](#) and subsequent [central planning](#). His work remains influential on Conservative politicians and lives on through leading think-tanks. RH Tawney was a Christian Socialist who was active as a member of the London County Council and the University grants Committee. He was President of the Workers' Educational Association; he influenced government, also the Labour Movement and the Church.

Beveridge was a Liberal, Hayek a significant inspiration to Margaret Thatcher, while Tawney influenced the Labour Party. The School has embraced political thinkers of very different kinds who were also either directly or indirectly influential on day-to-day policy and government.

After 1945, the School's staff included Brian Abel-Smith, Michael Oakeshott, Lionel Robbins, Richard Titmuss and Eileen Youngusband. Abel-Smith was directly involved in government as a special advisor to Labour ministers

about health policy. Oakeshott was a radically different figure who, while not directly involved with the messy business of government or politics, was highly influential on both Conservatives and Liberals. Robbins's eponymous report laid the foundations for the expansion of higher education in Britain, while Youngusband chaired an official working party which led to the wholesale reform of social work in Britain.

There is a thread of interest in contemporary political thinking, politics and government running through these and other LSE figures. Those considered as part of this initial examination of 'Influential Academics' during the School's early and middle years were thinkers, practitioners, writers and institutional inventors. More recent, contemporary, figures have followed similar paths.

Other universities could make a similar case. What is unique about the LSE is its particular history, its social science orientation and its geographical location. Elements of this history are available, though interviews with other LSE figures, on the website. The School's social science focus is another element in explaining why it has been able to have the impacts it has. This focus, aligned to a home equidistant between Westminster and the City, has made direct involvement in government and politics far easier than is the case for most other British institutions. Today, the LSE is less than three hours from Brussels, making involvement in European institutions relatively simple.

Such involvement is still much in evidence today. Many LSE academics are involved with government, Parliament and policy-making. For instance, Professor Eileen Munro led an official review of child protection, while Professor Julian le Grand chaired the government's *Mutuals Taskforce*. The LSE Growth Commission (working jointly with the Institute for Government), co-chaired by Professor John Van Reenen, recently produced a detailed set of policy proposals aimed at policy-makers.

LSE staff are also regularly involved in giving evidence to Parliamentary committees. In 2012 and 2013, Simon Hix (European Scrutiny Committee), Tim Besley (International Development Committee), Eileen Munro (Education Committee), José-Luis Fernandez (Health Committee), Stuart Gordon (International Development Committee), Charles Goodhart (Treasury Committee), Damian Tambini (Lords Committee on Media Convergence), Henry Overman (Transport Committee), Dimitri Zenghelis (Environmental Audit Committee), Elisham Ahmad (International Development Committee), Paul de Grauwe (Lords EU Sub-Committee on Economic and Financial Affairs), Samuel Fankhauser (Energy and Climate Change Committee), Tony Travers (Public Accounts Committee and [Raising the Capital – London Finance Commission Report](#)), John Hills (Energy and Climate Change Committee) and Patrick Dunleavy (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee) have all given evidence to Parliament.

Thus, the LSE history outlined above is part of a longer-term continuum of involvement between the School's academics on the one hand, and government and parliament on the other. In the coming months and years, additional individuals will be featured in the 'influentials' feature. Like the business of government, the LSE's work is on-going.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the Author

Tony Travers is Director of LSE London, a research centre at the London School of Economics. He is also a Visiting Professor in the LSE's Government Department.

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