Public Policy in Britain

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Edited by

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Preface

Public policy in Britain is currently at something of a cross-roads. In virtually every area of policy, but most particularly those areas which come under the umbrella of 'social policy' – health, housing, education, social security, personal social services and law and order – radical reforms are either under way or are at least on the political agenda. Fundamental shifts in the role of the state, and the redrawing of the former boundaries between 'public' and 'private' provision, are the order of the day. In an earlier publication (Savage and Robins, (eds.) 1990) an attempt was made to assess the impact of 'Thatcherism' on each of the main policy areas. On balance the conclusion then made was that, at the very least, that impact, in terms of the development of radical, New Right, policy reforms, was uneven and in some respects hardly apparent. In the contemporary political environment, however, it would seem hard to deny that radical reform is very much on the agenda. If anything the influence of New Right thought and ideology has been more in evidence since the departure of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister than before, this despite the relatively low key nature of political rhetoric which has characterised post-Thatcher Conservative leadership. The central concern of this book, therefore, is to assess the current status of public policy in Britain, against the backcloth of the political agendas of the Conservative Party as they have emerged since 1979.

The book will be divided into two parts. Part I will set out the 'contexts' of policy. It will discuss the more general developments in politics and policy which have set much of the scene for policy reforms in specific policy fields. Chapter 1 will consider the broader political basis of contemporary Conservatism, and some of the key ideological influences underpinning the politics of post-1979 Conservatism. Chapters 2 and 3 will address issues of 'structures' and 'styles' of governance since 1979 respectively, and the relationship between them and the agenda for public policy which has developed under the Conservatives. Chapter 4 will assess the impact of policy made within the wider context of the European Union on the domestic political scene. Taken together these chapters should make apparent some of the common threads which have run throughout separate areas of

public policy, and the origins of such common threads in fundamental political developments in the governance of Britain under the Conservatives.

Part II of the book will proceed to discuss in detail key issues and developments in each of the major areas of public policy, in the light of the contextual matters addressed in Part I. While each of these chapters can to an extent be treated as 'stand alone' discussions of discrete fields of policy, a fuller appreciation of each will be only possible when coupled with an awareness of the broader themes considered in Part I. Furthermore, the reader is advised to study the parallels and similarities between the various areas of policy, for example, between health reforms and educational policy, or between housing policy and reforms in the personal social services. In the Conclusion an attempt is made to draw together some of the general themes which have cut across public policy since 1979, and to place these in the context of the future of public policy in Britain.

A 'Guide to Further Reading' is provided toward the end of the book which indicates some of the key references within the literature in each area covered in the book.

STEPHEN P. SAVAGE
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Lynton Robins is Coordinator for Public Administration at De Montford University. He is co-author of *Contemporary British Politics*, co-editor of *Two Decades in British Politics* and editor of the Politics Association's journal, *Talking Politics*.

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Sandy Smith is a Senior Lecturer in Economics at the University of Portsmouth, and has a particular interests in the economics of central planning and market socialism, on which he has published a number of papers and articles.