The UK Social Policy Process

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Also by Catherine Bochel

The Careers of Councillors

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Parliament and Welfare Policy
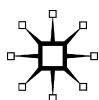*Scotland Decides: The Devolution Issue and the Scottish Referendum*
The Careers of Councillors

The UK Social Policy Process

Catherine Bochel and
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For Alistair and Isobel

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Preface

This book developed from our teaching and research interests and in particular from concerns about the importance of the policy process in influencing and affecting social policies and their impacts. The book itself arose from a view that whilst there were some good public policy texts and a wide range of journal articles dealing with this topic there was relatively little available which could easily be applied to social policy. What we have sought to do here is to examine some of the main contemporary debates over the policy process and social policy using conceptual frameworks and recent developments in both policies and the policy process. Whilst the range of concepts and influences is, given the subject matter, inevitably disparate, the thread that runs through the work can perhaps be characterised as an examination of the different ways in which power can be and is exercised on social policies throughout the policy process, from formulation through to implementation and evaluation. It is intended to provide theoretical understanding through which the policy process can be better analysed and understood. We hope that this book will therefore be of particular interest to students of social and public policy and to professionals whose work may well reflect many of the influences discussed here.

Although this work is our responsibility we would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers whose constructive observations informed the final shape of the book. We are also grateful to our editors at Palgrave Macmillan: Catherine Gray, both for listening to our idea initially and for her support throughout the project, and Kate Wallis for her enthusiastic encouragement as the writing came to an end. Finally, we must thank our students who have contributed to our thoughts on this work, and in particular those who read and commented on various drafts.

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

One of the key characteristics of the study of social policy is its interdisciplinary nature, drawing upon subjects such as economics, history, sociology and politics. It also embraces a variety of approaches. These include the exploration of social issues, such as the ageing population or community care, or social problems, for instance, crime, poverty and unemployment; the consideration of particular social groups, such as children or homeless people, or those in isolated rural areas; and examination of the main services: education, health care, housing, personal social services and social security. Given the dynamic nature of the subject, these and other methods are constantly developing. Yet the emphasis has, until recently, continued to lie largely in examinations of policies as responses to problems and demands, and the description and evaluation of those policies, rather than through insights that might emerge from wider consideration of the policy process. This book therefore seeks to present the analysis of the policy process as one means of encouraging a broad approach to the subject matter, drawing upon a wide range of concepts and models that can help us to contextualise, understand and explain developments from a perspective that provides, to some extent, an alternative consideration of the exercise of power in contemporary society.

As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1, some of the mechanisms which the Conservative governments of 1979 to 1997 utilised in their attempts to reform social policy, such as the greater use of competition and the market, including internal markets in welfare services, the increased emphasis on managers as opposed to professionals, and the extension of techniques such as audit and inspection, helped draw attention to the importance of these developments for social policy. Following the election of the Labour government in 1997 a host of new terms, including 'joined-up government', 'partnership', 'evidence-based policy', 'modernisation' and 'democratic renewal' not only became familiar, but continued to direct attention at the importance of the processes of policy making and implementation in social welfare. At the same time, many of the reforms introduced in the early years of the Labour government, such as devolution to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the passage of the Human Rights Act, further encouraged analysts to re-examine the policy process and its importance not only for the practice of social policy but also for adding to our understanding of key topics.

Using this book

Each of the chapters in this book provides information that can be used in an examination of the processes of policy formulation, implementation and evaluation as they relate to social policy. Whilst in general the book is designed to be read sequentially, clearly at any one time some chapters will be more relevant

than others, depending upon the reader's existing knowledge and their current interests. However, a fundamental point is that there are important inter-relationships between many of the ideas and structures that are contained in the separate chapters. In particular, many of the ideas in the later chapters can be interpreted and better understood by utilising those from earlier chapters. For example, the perspectives on bureaucracies introduced in Chapter 2, and the insights from public choice theories discussed in Chapter 3, might be applied in an analysis of the role and influence of the civil service as discussed in Chapter 4, to some parts of local government in Chapter 5, or to welfare bureaucracies more generally, including large parts of the National Health Service (NHS). Used in this way, the level of knowledge and understanding that can be gained from combining insights from different chapters is thus designed to be greater than the knowledge that arises from treating each chapter on its own.

The book is also designed to be used to help analyse and understand case study material, with the reader applying ideas, concepts and models as appropriate, to develop personal interpretations and understanding of the policy process and social policy. Included amongst the chapters are therefore a number of 'Figures' and 'Exhibits'. The Figures provide a variety of examples of the ideas that can be applied to the policy process and the exercise of power, whilst the Exhibits draw upon real-world examples to illustrate the applicability of certain ideas to contemporary social policy. Following a similar line of reasoning, and emphasising the frequent very real value of consulting original work, the Further Reading suggested at the end of each chapter in a number of instances, together with many of the references, refers readers to the original and sometimes distinctive sources, rather than to the often readable and enlightening secondary analysis of those.

Chapter 1 seeks to provide an underpinning for the remainder of the book. It considers the reasons for exploring the key role of the policy process in social policy, together with the parameters of policy analysis and associated fields such as public administration and public management. It explores the type of developments that occurred under the Conservatives during the 1980s and 1990s, noted briefly above, that helped focus attention not solely on their policies and the outcomes of these but also on the importance of the process in affecting the development of policies. It also outlines the intellectual challenges, perhaps most notably from the 'New Right' and from rational choice theory, which emerged for the traditional approaches during this period, some of which are examined in greater depth in the following chapters.

The book then moves on to a consideration of the key concepts, theories and models that can be used to aid our comprehension of the policy process, including through their application to some of the topics considered in later chapters. Chapter 2 introduces a variety of perspectives that can heighten our understanding, including different interpretations of the ways in which power can be exercised, with the introduction of the three dimensions or faces of power and models of 'rational' and 'incremental' decision making. This chapter also considers analyses of the role of bureaucracies, often of great but underestimated importance in social policy, and the implications of these for our understanding of power, decision making and the use of resources. Chapter 3 maintains the

focus on power, examining different theoretical approaches to understanding the distribution of power within society, from those which see power as being widely dispersed to those which see it as being largely exercised by small groups, or elites. Similarly, the lessons that can be learnt from the application of Marxist and public choice analyses are explored in this chapter. These ideas can in turn be used in the consideration of the concerns of the later chapters, with, for example, interpretation from pluralist and Marxist perspectives being used to inform our understanding of the role of elected representative bodies, including parliament and local government, in Chapters 4 and 5, and notions of participation in Chapter 6.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are largely concerned with 'structural' features, reflecting to some extent the importance of institutions as noted in Chapter 3, but also drawing upon some of the insights that the earlier discussion provides.

Chapter 4 outlines and analyses some of the key features of central government in the United Kingdom (UK), clearly important in the making of social policy, but also more or less directly responsible for policy implementation in areas such as health, income maintenance and employment, as well as more generally given the greater willingness of the Treasury to intervene in social policy in recent years. It also considers the role of the judiciary, which has been further increased by the passage of the Human Rights Act and the greater willingness to use legal processes as means of challenging the actions of public bodies.

Chapter 5 examines the newer tiers of decision making that are now relevant to social policy, including the European Union and the devolved administrations established in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, each of which has arguably started to exert new pressures on the development of social policies which may, in time, lead to greater diversity within the United Kingdom. Local government is also covered under this chapter, since, despite over twenty years of pressure from central government, it remains a significant player in some areas of welfare provision, particularly social care and education, as well as having a strategic and sometimes still an important providing role with regard to housing. Here the importance of central–local relations is analysed, together with the implications of these for social policy.

The concern of Chapter 6 is an area which has not generally been widely covered in social policy analyses, that of quasi-governmental organisations, or quangos. Particularly from the 1970s bodies such as these have been widely used by successive governments, despite frequent promises by the main political parties when in Opposition to reform or abolish them, and they, or organisations like them, are increasingly playing a significant role in social policy. This chapter considers the reasons for the continued importance of quasi-governmental bodies, despite frequently expressed concerns about them, particularly over the 'democratic deficit', with the use of appointed rather than elected members of local authorities.

In Chapter 7 a central concern of social policy, participation, is examined in relation to the policy process. It considers different approaches to participation and the mechanisms that have been utilised in attempts to realise this as a goal. The role of pressure groups, previously outlined in the discussion of pluralism

in Chapter 3, and concepts such as voluntarism and the 'active citizen', are discussed in relation to the social policy goals of governments.

Chapter 8 deals with evaluation, arguably always an important aspect of social policy, even if more often neglected than put into practice, but which has become more central, at least in terms of official rhetoric, under Labour since 1997. The chapter outlines different methods of evaluation and the uses to which evaluation has been put, including the now widespread use of performance indicators and targets. The place of policy transfer in the making of social policy is also discussed here. As throughout the book, connections can be made to other chapters, with, for example, policy transfer sometimes being linked to rational approaches to policy making, outlined in Chapter 2. The book concludes with a brief consideration of some of the lessons for social policy that can be learned from developments since 1979.

As with other perspectives on social policy, an approach grounded in the policy process is ever-changing, as evidenced by much of the discussion in this volume. However, it is perhaps possible to make a broad generalisation that over the past 25 years we have witnessed a move from what might be called the *government* of social policy to a position that is sometimes summarised as the *governance* of social policy. This change in phraseology reflects what has often been seen as a decline in the power of governments over the policy process, with more actors becoming involved, boundaries between public and private spheres becoming blurred and more tiers of government. Instead, it can be argued that we have moved to a more complex situation where it is more difficult for governments to take a top-down approach to policy making and implementation and it is more necessary to recognise the processes of consultation, exchange and the bringing together of resources and interests required for the exercise of power in contemporary society. However, this itself brings further implications for the making and implementation of social policies.

Social Policy and Social Policy Analysis

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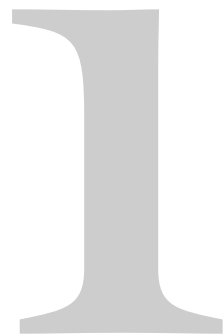
CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter outlines the development of interest in social policy analysis and the benefits to our understanding that can arise from this approach. In particular, changes that occurred under the Conservatives from 1979 to 1997 are highlighted in order to provide a setting against which developments under Labour since 1997 can be better analysed and understood. The variety of meanings and interpretations of terms such as 'social policy' and 'policy analysis' are outlined as a background to the core of the book, whilst links, overlaps and differences with the analysis of public policy are also examined. A number of intellectual challenges to the subject that have emerged from the 1980s onwards are discussed.

Whilst the contents of this book are wide-ranging, discussing both theoretical perspectives on and real-world examples of social policy, at its heart might be said to lie a consideration of who has power and how it is used and applied in social policy. Arguably it is impossible to take a considered overview of social policy without some consideration of this important question. The key concern of this book is therefore to examine the processes by which social policies are formulated, implemented and evaluated.

The book considers who has power in the making of social policy and the different ways in which power can be exercised. It therefore looks at models of agenda-setting, policy and decision making and at the various actors in the policy process, including politicians, bureaucrats and managers, and at the operation of different levels and forms of government, such as central government, local government and quasi-government. However, it seeks to go beyond a concern with who makes decisions to consider the entire policy process from the formulation of policies to their implementation and evaluation.

Why look at social policy making?

> Social policy uses political power to supersede, supplement or modify operations of the economic system in order to achieve results which the economic system could not achieve on its own. (Marshall, 1975, p. 15)

This quotation gives us a clear direction; it not only serves as a reminder that social policy can have a significant effect on people's lives but also refers explicitly to the use of political power. Recognition of this aspect of social policy implies the need to examine the *policy process* from the point of view of the exercise of power and influence as well as the development of policies. In other words, even if we have a solid grasp of particular social policies and their outcomes, perhaps including their impact upon different social groups or upon society as a whole, we none the less have to recognise and understand the relationship with politics and in particular the exercise of *power*. That power is of central importance to social policy and the provision of welfare is aptly demonstrated by the title that Beveridge himself gave to his autobiography, *Power and Influence* (1953), and his recognition that the theme of the title was 'the chief alternative ways by which things get done in the world of affairs' (p. 3).

From the 1980s the study of social policy has developed rapidly for a variety of reasons. These include what was seen by some as a 'crisis' of the welfare state and the impact of new and different critiques of welfare, such as those from the 'New Right', feminists, black people and disabled people, all of which had important implications not only for the delivery of social policies and welfare but also for the way in which we see the subject. For example, there is now more attention paid to the way in which needs and dependencies are created and reinforced, including by society and social policies. Similarly what Cahill (1994) termed the 'new' areas of social policy, such as food, transport and the environment, have frequently been accorded more attention than was previously the case, and links from these increasingly made to 'old' social policy issues. The rapid expansion of comparative social policy has greatly increased our knowledge of the welfare systems of other countries; Britain is no longer seen as unique in providing comprehensive welfare, and different models of welfare from around the world are now used in social policy. In addition, due in part to the long period of Conservative government from 1979 to 1997, there has also been a major shift in emphasis and awareness away from a concern with state welfare and the welfare state towards looking beyond the state, to the role of individuals, the voluntary sector and the private sector, in the provision of welfare. However, importantly for this book, there are a number of issues around this. For example, whilst the state may traditionally have had little involvement in some areas of welfare provision (such as child care for young children) there may be much to be learnt from examining the reasons for its absence from these areas, and we should also recognise that the state may be as important in its policies and lack of policies as in what it provides. There is, for instance, considerable debate about the extent to which it is possible for the state to regulate and control public services without owning and providing them directly. This book will therefore inevitably have a focus upon government and the state, although it will take account of 'non-state' activities and areas of social policy.

Despite these advances there are arguably a number of weaknesses remaining in much of the academic study of social policy. In particular, for the purposes of this book, the study of social policy tends to have concentrated (albeit for understandable reasons) on deliberate decisions and policies (legislation being an obvious pointer here), and on the impact of social policies. This means that there is a tendency to neglect alternatives that are excluded, deliberately or otherwise, from the policy-making process, and the reasons for such exclusions. Less attention has been given to areas in which the state has shown relatively little interest, such as child care for young children, and to exploring the reasons for the lack of positive policies. Social policy as a subject has therefore tended to neglect consideration of the processes of policy formulation and what the study of these can tell us about the way in which power to influence policies is distributed and exercised. Whilst this is to some extent inevitable, given that individuals can only have a limited breadth of knowledge and expertise, there is room for a greater appreciation of these issues and their implications for the understanding and development of social policy, as illustrated by Exhibit 1.1.

EXHIBIT 1.1   ANALYSING THE POLICY PROCESS: QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Salter and Tapper provide an elegant example of the ability to make links between the role and impact of ideology and the policy process, using what they term the discourse of quality assurance in higher education. They note the transition in higher education since the 1960s, from a position where the autonomy of both institutions and individual academics was seen as the cardinal principle to a situation where the governance of the two main activities of higher education – teaching and research – have been brought significantly closer to control by state bureaucrats and politicians. This, they suggest, has occurred through the development of arguments about the need for public accountability and the imposition of mechanisms of audit for research (the Research Assessment Exercise) and teaching (the Quality Assurance Agency and its work). These can be linked to the growth of a view within governments about the economic ideology of education – that education is an economic resource that should be used to maximise its contribution to the country's economic development. However, they note that during the 1960s and 1970s the Department for Education and Science lacked the bureaucratic power to change the situation, particularly given the 'historically entrenched interest of the academic profession' (p. 70). It was only with the election of the New Right influenced Conservative governments, the development of the new public management and the growth of mass higher education that the discourse shifted to enable an outright challenge to the traditional orthodoxy, at least in part, through support for consumerism, the market and the emergence of an 'audit culture' in higher education. In addition they note a change in power relations with a decrease in power for academics and an increase in power for managers, and for intermediate organisations such as the Quality Assurance Agency.

B Salter and T Tapper, 'The Politics of Governance in Higher Education: The Case of Quality Assurance', *Political Studies*, vol. 48 (2000), pp. 66–87.

What is policy?

But what is policy? There is considerable disagreement on this. It has been described as 'whatever governments choose to do or not to do' (Dye, 1984, p. 1) and as 'a course of action or inaction rather than specific decisions or actions' (Heclo, 1972, p. 85). Hill (1997a) builds upon Easton's (1953, 1965) view that whilst policy may sometimes involve one decision, more often 'it involves either groups of decisions or what may be seen as little more than an orientation' (p. 7) and notes that this leads to an increasingly complex set of implications and understanding of the use of the term 'policy'. Other writers also argue that we need to take much more into account, such as 'non-decisions' or 'the mobilisation of bias', as discussed in Chapter 2.

However, Anderson (1997) prefers a conceptualisation of policy that emphasises actions rather than intentions: 'A relatively stable, purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern' (p. 9). He argues that this differentiates between decisions, following which there may be no action, and policy. An alternative approach is taken by systems theory (for example, Easton, 1965), which argues that political activity can be analysed in terms of a system containing a number of processes which need to be kept in balance if the system is to survive. According to proponents of this view we need to look at the environment in which the political system operates and which contains a number of other systems, including social systems and ecological systems. At its most basic, there are a range of inputs to the political system which are converted into outputs, including policies, which themselves have an impact upon the wider economic, political and social environment and may again lead, directly or indirectly, to new inputs. Whilst there are a number of strengths and weaknesses with this approach it does suggest that policy analysts do have to consider the social, economic and political contexts within which problems are tackled.

It is certainly true that most of us talk happily about 'policy' and 'policies'. But, reflecting the definitional difficulties discussed above, what do we mean when we use these words? We may be clear about the usage in each particular instance, but can we then be sure that we are using them consistently? For example, Hogwood and Gunn (1984) identify ten uses of the term 'policy', as:

1. A label for a field of activity – this is used, for example, in broad statements about 'economic policy' or 'social policy', as well as to more specific areas such as pensions policy, education policy, transport policy, health policy or housing policy.
2. An expression of general purpose or desired state of affairs – such as the statement in Labour's 1997 election manifesto that 'An explicit objective of a Labour government will be to raise the trend rate of growth by strengthening our wealth-creating base. We will nurture investment in industry, skills, infrastructure and new technologies. And we will attack long-term unemployment, especially among young people. Our goal will be educational and employment opportunities for all' (Labour Party, 1997, p. 11).

3. Specific proposals – in its 1997 manifesto *Because Britain Deserves Better*, Labour undertook to hold referendums for devolution to Scotland and Wales and then to introduce a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly; other specific proposals may arise out of short-term or *ad hoc* problems or opportunities, such as the hospital bed shortages that frequently occurred in the winter months during the 1990s, with governments feeling obliged to respond in some manner.

4. Decisions of government – these may frequently be more immediate responses to domestic or international challenges or opportunities, such as the Conservative governments' responses to the BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) cattle crisis in the 1990s. In the UK, governments can generally be fairly sure about getting formal ratification through Parliament because of their overall majorities in the House of Commons, and these are widely seen as one form of 'policy'.

5. Formal authorisation, perhaps reflected in a specific piece of legislation – however, the passage of an Act does not ensure that the activities will then take place. For example, the full requirements of the 1986 Disabled Persons' (Services, Consultation and Representation) Act were never implemented, partly as the government had fears about the full costs and implications of the legislation.

6. A programme – a relatively specific sphere of government activity, such as community care in the 1980s and 1990s, or within that the intention to run down long-term psychiatric hospitals, both of which could be referred to as 'policies'.

7. Output – what government delivers – these may be varied in nature, from examples such as payment of social security benefits, through reductions in class sizes to tax cuts or increases.

8. Outcome – what is achieved – here the distinction with outputs may often be hard to make. However, the study of outcomes involves an assessment of whether the policy is achieving its stated aims, as opposed to a focus on what is actually delivered.

9. A theory or model – policies involve assumptions about cause and effect. In 1979, in the new Conservative government's first budget, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Geoffrey Howe, argued that 'Public expenditure is at the heart of Britain's present economic difficulties' (HM Treasury, 1979, p. 1), the assumption clearly being that reductions in public expenditure would improve the country's economic performance. On a rather different note, Labour's 1997 manifesto claimed that 'In a global economy the route to growth is stability not inflation. The root causes of inflation and low growth are the same – an economic and industrial base that remains weak… Our goals are low inflation, rising living standards and high and stable levels of employment' (Labour Party, 1997, p. 11). Both of these statements make assumptions that if governments do one thing, then another will happen. Yet in practice the causal relationships are generally more complex than this, and other factors have a major impact on the success or failure of policy.

10. A process – policy making and implementation is a continuous process: it cannot easily be analysed through the examination of specific decisions, and the introduction of one policy may itself have implications for others. Those who study social policy need to be aware of this and to take account of the complex and longitudinal nature of the process.

From this discussion it is clearly the case that the term 'policy' will be utilised differently in different contexts and by different groups of users. Levin (1997) has drawn attention to the differences in the use and definition of 'policy' between politicians, who he suggests generally use the term 'to denote a proposal or set of proposals carrying commitment to future action' (p. 20), and academics who 'set out to *define* "policy" rather than investigate how politicians and officials use the term' (p. 23).

The lesson from all of this is that rather than attempting to single out one true 'definition', we should accept that the term 'policy' will be used in a variety of senses, and that as students of social policy we need to be aware of the possible distinctions and take these into account in our explorations and analyses. Much of the discussion in the remainder of this book will shed light on alternative approaches to the understanding and analysis of policy in its different guises and may itself alter our understanding of the concept.

What is social policy?

What then distinguishes *social* policies from other forms of policy? As with 'policy' there are a variety of definitions. If anything, as the academic subject of social policy has developed and expanded, so attempts to define it have become more difficult. Placing emphasis on its role as an agent of distribution of various desirable factors in society, Alan Walker suggested that social policy might be defined as:

> the rationale underlying the development and use of social institutions and groups which affect the distribution of resources, status and power between different individuals and groups in society. Thus social policy is concerned both with the values and principles which govern distribution as well as their outcome. The task of the social policy analyst is to evaluate the distributional impact of existing policies on social welfare, their implicit and explicit rationales, their impact on social relations and the implications of policy proposals (A Walker, 1983, p. 141).

Social policy has also frequently been defined in relation to the major areas of policy which it is commonly seen as encompassing, perhaps most frequently including education, employment, health, housing, the personal social services and social security. However, as indicated earlier, academics at least are now extending the concept of social policy to 'new' fields such as the environment, food, transport and even arts and cultural policy (for example, Baldock *et al.*, 1999; Cahill, 1994). These and other developments, such as the emphasis on social exclusion and inclusion, mean that an approach grounded in 'areas of policy' becomes more complicated and cumbersome. In addition, issues such as crime

and criminal justice have sometimes been treated as part of social policy and at others have largely been excluded from discussions of social policy.

Traditionally much of the social policy literature was concerned primarily with the role of the state, and in particular with its direct provision of welfare, implying a definition of social policy as what the state does in the areas of policy discussed above. Now that there is widespread understanding that a large amount of welfare is provided outside the public sector, social policy is often taken to include not only state provisions and decisions but also those of the informal, voluntary and private sectors.

Criteria have sometimes been suggested which attempt to enable a distinction to be made between social and other forms of policy. For example, it might be said that there is a difference between services delivered on a one-to-one basis, such as a social security payment or a GP (general practitioner) consultation, and the more shared outputs of, say, foreign or cultural policy, and that the former but not the latter would be included in the category of 'social policy'. However, making such distinctions can be tortuous and unprofitable. It may not be advantageous, or even desirable, to attempt to identify where boundaries lie between (traditional) social and other types of policy. Whilst economic policy and social policy are often viewed as very different and are studied separately, there are clearly and inevitably close links between them. During the Thatcher years the primacy of economic policy over and its effects upon social policy were clear. Much of the emphasis was on monetary controls and limiting public expenditure, but this in turn placed welfare services under financial stress; at the same time the rise in unemployment and consequently in the number of benefits claimants created an increased demand for the social security budget that made it hard for the Conservatives to achieve their intended cuts in public expenditure. In contrast, since 1997 Labour have arguably been using economic policy more in conjunction with social policy, reducing unemployment, raising the possibility of full employment, and introducing a measure of redistribution (to some groups) through the tax and benefits systems.

In the light of the above discussion, there is a strong argument for supporting Levin's (1997) observation that rather than concentrating on what he views as the use of rather narrow and ethnocentric academic definitions, it is preferable to focus on:

> the coming into being of policies and measures, which is part of a wider phenomenon, the interaction of government and society. From this standpoint, the definitions and boundaries which academics seek to assign to 'social policy' are irrelevant as well as arbitrary (Levin, 1997, p. 26).

What is policy analysis?

So what is policy analysis? It is arguable that policy analysis can be traced back to the Second World War as governments began to gather increasing amounts of information about economic policy and about defence policy. However, as the state grew in size and responsibilities, governments began to require more information about other areas such as urban planning, transport, health and