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Themed Section on the Policy Process and Social Policy

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Despite the frequent comparisons and discussions of continuity between the Conservatives' social policies and those of New Labour, it is certainly true that the mechanisms which each has used to develop and implement social policy have been rhetorically, and often practically, different. Under the Conservatives the emphasis on markets and marketisation, with the centrality of the 'consumer', was reflected in social policy including through devices such as privatisation, compulsory competitive tendering, the creation of internal markets, managerialism and the use of 'Next Steps' agencies for delivery. New Labour's approach has made familiar terms such as 'joined-up' government, 'evidence-based' policy, 'partnership', 'modernisation' and 'democratic renewal'. And, whatever might be said about their social policies, New Labour have shown a degree of radicalism in their governmental and constitutional reforms, most notably perhaps through devolution to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the passing of the Human Rights Act. At the same time, the EU has been developing as a political and decision-making entity with an emerging social dimension, that has, as Duncan argues here, the potential for some impact on UK social policy.

These developments have been encouraging us to focus more on the processes by which policies are made, implemented and evaluated. It is perhaps not surprising, given that the devolved administrations have now been in existence for three years, and the debates over their potential for future change, that attention is being paid to the extent to which they have 'made a difference'. Here, the articles by Parry and McLelland focus on different aspects of devolution in Scotland and Wales respectively. The former examines new structures of policy making and the relationship with policy outcomes, and suggests that thus far the potential of devolution has been constrained by a perceived need for compatibility with pre-devolution structures and patterns of services, noting that the real potential for disputes over and between social policy and constitutional policy are likely to arise when political control in Edinburgh differs from that in London. The latter considers health policy in Wales, and in particular the continued dominance of hospital-based provision, and similarly notes that the potential for differential development of social policy has been inhibited, in this case perhaps largely due to the dominant value base among the policy community in Wales about the nature of the NHS.

In an analysis of the EU policy discourse on the 'reconciliation of work and family life' Duncan argues that New Labour face a policy disjuncture, being ideologically drawn towards the more liberal US model of flexible labour, whilst at the same time being required under EU law to implement a more corporatist gender equality model, heavily influenced by the accession of Sweden and Finland to the EU in the mid-1990s. In doing this he considers whether EU policy makes a difference, concluding that whilst

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'quieter', it should receive as much attention as the 'noisy' Atlantacist discourse in its influence on social policy.

In contrast, Ben-Arieh's topic and approach present a completely different aspect of analysing the policy process. His examination of the activities of Members of the Israeli Knesset's (MKs) in relation to child welfare policy seeks to utilise a quantitative approach to this topic and to start to develop models for both explaining MKs' behaviour and, potentially, predicting it, based upon a number of background variables. In doing this he also sheds some light on the complexity of policy making in a state where much of the political emphasis is on foreign policy and the peace process.

Newman's article provides a wide-ranging overview of a range of literature on the policy process, including reflections on the shift towards governance and New Labour's themes of 'modernisation' and 'what works'. Drawing upon a variety of perspectives she concludes that a concern with the dynamics of policy process is necessary for us to develop a real understanding of social policy.

Taken as a group, with their differing approaches and topics, these articles demonstrate that a consideration of the policy process, possible from a number of perspectives, can provide opportunities for deepening our insights into the true nature of social policy. They also encourage us to consider the implications of future developments, such as regional government and e-government, in terms of policy management, service delivery and effectiveness.

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