

SUMMARY

Academy of Social Sciences Report Launch – Beyond the Ballot

Tuesday 7 January 2025, House of Commons

The APPG on Social Science and Policy convened on 7 January 2025 to mark the parliamentary launch of the Academy of Social Sciences' new report, [Beyond the Ballot](#). The event was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Chaired by Yuan Yang, Labour MP for Earley and Woodley, the event highlighted how social science research can inform key policy challenges facing the new government. The group heard from Will Hutton, President of the Academy of Social Sciences, Dr Ed Bridges, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at the Academy of Social Sciences, and Torsten Bell, Labour MP for Swansea West. The meeting brought together Parliamentarians and academics to discuss how evidence-based policymaking and collaboration across sectors can drive positive change.

Introduction to the importance of social science to public policy

Yuan Yang welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the speakers and the report to the group. She encouraged everyone to read the report and consider how we can bring social science to the heart of policymaking.

Will Hutton gave the first presentation, framing the discussion around the evolving role of social science in times of national transition.

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1. **1750–1850:** Social science emerged as a response to the Industrial Revolution, as thinkers like Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau sought to understand rapid economic change and its impact on society.
2. **1850–early 1900s:** As industrialisation expanded, social reformers drove forward policies to address poverty, public health, and labour rights, culminating in the Liberal government’s reforms from 1906–1914.
3. **1930s–1940s:** The economic crises of the 1930s and the post-war years saw Keynesian economics and William Beveridge’s social welfare proposals reshape society.
4. **1960s–1970s:** Social movements and economic restructuring in the 1960s and 70s brought new challenges around inequality, gender, and race, leading to significant policy shifts and the rise of neoliberalism.
5. **Recent times:** This period prioritises inclusive growth, sustainability, and addressing climate change. Will Hutton outlined that the task ahead is to ensure growth is equitable and widely distributed.

Will Hutton emphasised the importance of applying lessons from these past transitions to address contemporary challenges, urging greater collaboration between policymakers and social scientists.

Key themes from the *Beyond the Ballot* report

Dr Ed Bridges presented the key findings from *Beyond the Ballot*, outlining how the report draws on 43 commissioned articles and extensive engagement across academia and public policy. He began by explaining the scope of social sciences, highlighting their relevance across fields such as economics, health, and education.

Ed Bridges stressed that social science provides crucial insights into areas directly impacting the UK’s policymaking agenda. He outlined five standout case studies from the report, showcasing the real-world impact of social science:

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1. **Born in Bradford project:** This longitudinal study tracks the lives of over 40,000 people, demonstrating how green spaces improve public health outcomes. The research directly influenced urban planning policies in Bradford, securing millions in investment to improve local environments.
2. **City-REDI** (University of Birmingham): Research on economic resilience in the West Midlands informed regional recovery strategies post-Brexit and Covid-19, contributing to significant infrastructure funding.
3. **Decision Maker Panel** (Bank of England): This business survey provides real-time data on economic conditions, influencing tax policy and shaping investment allowances.
4. **National Living Wage research:** Social science contributed to the introduction of the National Living Wage, benefiting over 1.5 million workers and reducing wage inequality.
5. **Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations** (CAST): CAST's work on behavioural change informed climate policies and net-zero strategies adopted by local governments.

Ed Bridges concluded by calling for sustained investment in social science research, improved collaboration between universities and policymakers, and the creation of regular forums to share insights and inform policy development.

Political engagement

Torsten Bell MP told the group that currently the world is full of urgent, unanswered questions – from inflation to climate change and social care – to which social scientists can help find solutions. He said the challenge lies in connecting research to decision-making. However, there are some ministers willing to listen: he described seeing ministers with stacks of research papers on their desks, eager for insights.

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Key insights from the Q&A

- **Embedding social science in policy design:** The panel stressed that social science should inform policymaking from the outset so that evidence drives decisions rather than being used to justify outcomes retrospectively. Clive Efford MP described the difference between research and politics as being the difference between Eeyore and Tigger. Sometimes there has to be a change of pace for academics to impact on policy decisions.
- **Addressing regional inequalities:** Attendees were keen to understand how social science can reduce regional disparities. Yuan Yang noted that social science can offer insights into how funding can be best targeted, as well as demographic and behavioural data.
- **Framing:** There was a difference of views about the weight academics should place on language in policy discussions. Torsten Bell MP argued that discussions on language should not distract from finding solutions to problems, though an audience member argued that how we frame issues impacts on how they are received by the public and politicians (e.g. welfare vs social security).
- **Trust:** A recurring theme was how behavioural science can improve public trust and participation. A need was identified to find analogies which are more pertinent to people's lives.
- **Challenges in data quality:** Concerns were raised about the quality of British data. Torsten Bell MP acknowledged the issue, urging more incentives in UK-specific data collection. He also suggested that gaps in labour market data must be urgently addressed to support informed decision-making. Yuan Yang noted that collaboration between universities and government agencies can help improve data quality.
- **Communicating research to policymakers:** A key insight was the need to translate academic research into concise, actionable insights for policymakers who may not have time to engage deeply with lengthy reports.

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