

Dear James Strachan,

Thank you for the invitation to comment on the review of the '30-Year Rule.'

From the point of view of historians of contemporary Britain, the decision of Harold Wilson's government to reduce the 50-year rule to a 30-year rule has proved to be an enormous success. It has been a major stimulus to research, resulting in a large and ever growing body of scholarly work on the post-war history of Britain. The main significance of the rule is that it now marks, approximately speaking, the chronological point at which the academically-based history of government and public policy come to a stop—currently the year 1977 - and more provisional accounts begin. While historians of contemporary Britain obviously have a strong professional interest at stake here, academic history also serves wider public purposes. Firstly the process of academic discussion and debate prevents the establishment of impregnable myths. Secondly the study of public policy provides a store of experience about the recent past, and an assessment of the successes and failures of government, upon which all participants in the political nation are free to draw.

There is therefore a strong case for extending the scope of contemporary history through a relaxation of the 30-year rule, but the question is how far this should go. (I am assuming here that the Freedom of Information Act is only of limited or occasional significance for academic historians). I doubt if a radical reduction to a five or ten year rule would be feasible or desirable. Apart from considerations of administration and cost, any government

which had been in office for longer than the period in question would be subject to a continuous critique of its earlier record. In all probability academic history would be sidelined and the discussion of recent history degenerate into a media-led extension of current political rivalries and debates. It seems therefore most unlikely that any government would be prepared to endorse a reduction to a five or ten year rule, or that such a reduction would promote the objective study of recent events.

A reduction of the period of closure to twenty years is a much more attractive and viable option. There could still be problems at the margin. A 20-year rule would obviously be more likely than a 30-year rule to result in controversial disclosures about issues that were still sensitive, or officials who were still in office. It might result in occasional embarrassment in relations with long-serving heads of state or political leaders overseas. In the most sensitive areas, however (e.g. Northern Ireland), the problem could be dealt with by applying an extended period of closure to the files. This would no doubt apply also in the case of much of the material relating to secret intelligence. There could also be administrative problems as a result of which the transition to a twenty-year rule might have to be organised in stages. For most purposes, however, twenty years is a period sufficiently distant in time for the archives to be explored with some degree of detachment and perspective (including detachment and perspective on the part of academics themselves) and hence for history to be written in line with academic criteria.

If a 20-year rule is introduced, the first consequence will be the opening up and re-assessment of the Thatcher era in its entirety. This is likely to

generate a great deal of historical debate, but it is also likely that in the course of such a debate many myths and distortions will be swept away, with invigorating consequences for political thought across the spectrum of British politics.

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