EDITORIAL: Racialisation and public policy

Policy and Politics published a special issue on gender in 1989 (Gender and public policy: European law and British equal opportunity policies, edited by Elizabeth Meehan and Gill Whitting, Vol 17, No 4). Given this precedent it was not surprising that a special issue to consider race and public policy was suggested. However, the process leading up to this present issue was different to the gender special in that we did not collect the contributions together through holding a conference. Instead we tried to commission papers from academics and practitioners (including politicians) which would concentrate upon one of three main issues, namely racial and ethnic identity (in particular how they differ and overlap), issues to do with service delivery in a range of key areas or the need to develop a broader European perspective.

'Racialisation and public policy' is the outcome of this process. We departed somewhat from our original plan when confronted by the difficulty of getting would be contributors to meet our deadlines, but hope that this collection of papers will serve as a marker for the need for further submissions on this topic. We see the special issue as only the starting point in the process of improving the coverage of 'race' in Policy and Politics. This is important because racial policy issues are profoundly unpopular in the UK at the moment. These were never easy subjects theoretically but they have become political liabilities for politicians and hence a potential minefield for the professional policy maker. Race is an area where economies in attention and expenditure have been made.

The aim of this issue, as indicated by its title 'Racialisation and public policy', is to focus on racial public policy issues but to do so critically. To this end we have chosen to use a term perhaps unfamiliar to many of our readers, namely 'racialisation'. Put simply this refers to the process by which racial meanings are constructed and extended to new areas of social relationships (Omi and Winant, 1986, p 64; Smith, 1989, p 3). The value in using racialisation in the title of this special issue is that it serves as an indicator that there are alternatives to the unpopular and confusing 'race relations problematic' which runs the risk of propping up what it seeks to undermine, namely racism. The 'race relations problematic' encourages an overly fixed and static view of racial groups. This problematic fails to stress the dynamic and variable social and political construction of racial and ethnic differentiation. As a result, the race relations problematic makes it difficult for policy analysts to do anything other than reinforce and reify these classifications or to confuse them with other overlapping constructions like ethnicity and nationality.

Lastly, we think that racial issues deserve renewed examination in light of examples such as the recent government scrutiny and review of Section 11 of the 1966 Local Government Act. This has seen a return to the UK concern of the mid-sixties, namely cultural integration, and moved the focus away from tackling unpopular racial issues such as the racist nature of much local government provision. Given these trends and the cold financial and political winds blowing through British local government, combined with the irony of Britain being seen as the expert on good practice on racial policies in Europe, it seems crucial to keep open the debate about racial issues and the role of the state.

REFERENCES


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