EDITORIAL

Jeremy Bentham, the English philosopher who first tried to place public policy on a scientific footing, defined agenda as the desirable activities of government. He contrasted agenda with sponte acta — activities that individuals carry out spontaneously — and with non-agenda — undesirable activities of government. With economic development, so Bentham believed, the agenda would gradually shrink as more and more activities became sponte acta. ‘Be quiet ought . . . to be the motto, or watch word, of government.’

Bentham wrote these words in the first few years of the 19th century. A few decades later, Britain was in the midst of a long period of reform in which many obstacles to individual freedom and enterprise were swept away. But by the end of the same century, opinion had begun to turn against Bentham’s vision of small and shrinking government. In the 20th century, this trend in thinking has continued. As a result, government has grown greatly in size and scope.

Yet in the last 20 years the agenda of government has become controversial. With the slowing of post-war economic growth in the early 1970s came the realisation that well-intentioned government interventions often did more harm than good. Since then, the systematic study of public policy has grown and become a private-sector as well as a public-sector activity whose findings are widely broadcast. But although some critics of public policy are inspired by a priori views of the limits of government that stem from the liberal tradition, most of them remain within the Benthamite framework of utilitarian pragmatism by searching for policies that work.

In choosing the title Agenda for this new journal, then, we allude not just to the ‘desirable’ role of government but to the more common definition of the term: ‘items to be considered’. No proposal for a government role in the economy is ruled out. But it must observe the hallmarks of serious policy analysis: comprehensive and reliable evidence, and sound interpretation. This includes an emphasis above all on the remote, unseen and unintended consequences of policies and policy proposals.

Neither the title nor the subtitle limits the journal’s scope to economic policy. We aim to give space to articles on the ideas and doctrines that inform policy debate, and on the institutions and processes through which policies are formulated and implemented. We welcome contributions from all disciplines relevant to public policy: this inaugural issue includes two articles by lawyers on the legal protection of human rights, for example. Academic specialisation may be unavoidable, but it need not result in ‘narrowness’ if experts in their chosen fields retain a curiosity in and openness towards other disciplines. But if these qualities are to bear fruit, there has to be easy and lively communication between writer and reader, which in turn requires an effort to write English plainly and with as little resort to technical terms as the topic under discussion allows.
The growth of government, combined with the expansion of media technology, has produced an explosion of policy information that threatens to become overwhelming. But we are confident that a place exists for a policy journal that, while observing the traditional standards and procedures of academic publishing, appeals to a public that takes the long view and does not allow each government statement to obliterate its memory of all previous ones. We await your verdict.