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Using primary sources

In your normal lessons you use original sources. You will find them in textbooks, websites and on handouts your teacher has prepared for you. You will also find them in assignments and examination papers.

Using the Cabinet Papers

Using this website is more like the work of a research historian than an 'A' Level student. As a student, examiners, textbook authors or your teacher provide guidance, questions and tasks to help you extract information and make a judgement based on the sources they have selected for you.

The Cabinet Papers are not like this. When you search through them you are working like a professional historian.

- The sources are assembled in a huge collection ranging across all British Cabinets from 1916-1976. There are thousands of separate documents
- They are not separated neatly into categories and labelled precisely with helpful captions. They are organised by date. On a particular date the Cabinet might have discussed foreign affairs, education and industrial relations all in one meeting. This means you have to sift through documents to find the information you are looking for
- They are not organised into curriculum categories. This means that you as a researcher are dependent on which documents survive, whether you can find what you are looking for in those documents, and whether you can use those documents to improve your understanding of particular topics

If you are studying the 'A' Level packages where we have selected sources for you then you will get some of the guidance that textbooks and examination papers usually provide. However, wherever the sources came from you will still have to use the same skills and techniques that historians use.

Using sources in the 'A' Level packages

Using original sources is not the same as using a textbook. Essentially, when you use a textbook you are asking yourself 'what does this text say?' and you can reasonably expect to trust the content of the textbook and assume that the information in it is correct and relevant to your area of study.

It can be very different when using primary sources. Here you need to consider not so much what the source says, but what it tells you. In other words you need to make inferences based on the content of the source. These inferences will be based on your reading of the source, on comparisons with other sources and comparing the content of the source with secondary source material (such as textbooks).

Points to consider

Author

The authorship of any part of a Cabinet paper is extremely important. Generally, ministers spoke in Cabinet about areas they were responsible for. We can generally assume they were well informed about that area. Unlike some primary sources, it is very unlikely that the information in a Cabinet Paper is designed to mislead. However, this does not mean that the information in any given source cannot be misleading.

Cabinet discussions take place in the frantic activity of government, often responding to crisis situations at short notice. Ministers often presented information about issues such as industrial relations or foreign affairs to their colleagues in the Cabinet in order to keep them up to date. However, occasionally it was known for the information the minister had been given by his officials to be out of date or inaccurate without intention to mislead. In this instance the Papers are not valuable as indicators of the factual reality of a particular situation – this can be checked against other sources and textbooks.

Remember - a misleading briefing from the Cabinet Papers can be extremely useful as a source of information on what the Cabinet believed at a particular time. This in turn could provide a valuable insight into explaining why the Cabinet took particular decisions at particular times. A minister might be attempting to talk up the extent of his own achievements or presenting a particular view on an issue because he cares passionately about it. We can find a good example of this can be seen in Aneurin Bevan's presentations to the Cabinet in the National Health Service (NHS) Investigation.

Context

Context is vital to any primary source and it may mean different things depending on the source. Context may, for example, mean the events surrounding a particular Cabinet discussion. An obvious example of this would be the General Strike. It is important to be aware of the precise date of a Cabinet discussion on the General Strike because the Strike itself only lasted nine days. Remember that context and authorship may well be linked. For example, comments by the Conservative Chancellor Peter Thorneycroft in the late 1950s on the cost of the National Health Service (NHS) need to be viewed in the context that Thorneycroft was deeply concerned about the costs of the NHS and welfare spending generally, and would eventually resign over this issue.

Purpose

Possibly the most important consideration when using primary sources is the purpose. In most Cabinet Papers the purpose of the various ministers and officials who contribute is to inform the Cabinet about a particular issue so that a decision can be made. In these instances it is reasonable to assume that such papers provide a realistic and accurate summary of the views of the government on a particular issue. However, it is also common in Cabinet Papers that ministers relate their activities back to the Cabinet. As well as providing an insight into the activities of ministers and the Cabinet, such documents can provide an insight into what areas and issues the government saw as priorities for their attention and action.

Guidelines to follow

Armed with the above points, you should be able to make use of the Cabinet Papers like a professional historian. The following guidelines may be helpful as you do make use of them:

- What is the subject being covered in the document?
- When a point is made, what evidence is used to support it?
- Does the style, tone, language of the document reveal anything about the author or the purpose of the document?
- What is happening at the time of the document?
- What do you know about the events at the time or the persons who make statements in the document?
- Do any other sources corroborate the document?
- Does any other material corroborate the document (such as textbooks)?
- Is the document useful as a factual source in its own right or does it reveal more about the views of the author(s)?