

The politics of evaluation: evidence-based policy or policy-based evidence?

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Abstract

The argument for evidence-based policy-making is based on assumptions that knowledge of ‘what works’ eliminates much of the risk associated with the experimental nature of policy development. And this is where evaluation ideally should—and is purported to—play a role in evidence-based policy. However, the experience of the presenters suggests that policy is often made despite the evidence of ‘what works’. This is not to suggest that evaluations around key policy issues are not carried out—they are. However, in too many cases an evaluation is designed to gather data that supports the policy. Alternatively, if the evaluation findings are politically sensitive, they may not be publicly released and may even be ignored internally. A further possibility is that the department which commissioned the evaluation will restructure and the evaluation findings no longer have relevance. All of this suggests that often ‘evidence-based policy making’ is little more than a myth. Drawing on Northern Territory examples, the presenters will argue the case for evidence-based policy and suggest the conditions required for the concept to become embedded in the practice of good policy-making.

1. Introduction

There are few who would dispute the idea that policy-making should be based on sound evidence. Internationally, there are examples of newly elected governments claiming this as a point of difference from the previous regime—the UK Blair Labor government is a notable example. In Australia, the importance of evidence-based policy-making was highlighted by the Labor government in 2007, and ongoing public service reforms have highlighted the issue. In May 2010, the Prime Minister accepted all the recommendations of the Moran Review, *Ahead of the Game* report (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration 2010), including:

- strategic partnerships with external organisations for forward looking, high quality, creative policy development; and
- policies designed with implementation in mind.

The Northern Territory Government has not publicly endorsed evidence-based policy to the same extent, but the Northern Territory Treasury website states that: ‘The development and use of evidence-based policy is promoted across all Northern Territory Government agencies’(Northern Territory Treasury 2006).

Evidence-based policy explicitly underpins some recent developments in the Northern Territory (Department of Education and Training 2010b; Department of Education and Training 2010a) and the Partnership Agreement between the Northern Territory Government and Charles Darwin University (CDU) identifies one of its core outcomes as ‘research and evaluation that contributes to public policy and service delivery methods relevant to the NT’s economic, social and environmental needs’ (Charles Darwin University 2010).

The argument for evidence in policy-making is based on assumptions that knowledge of ‘what works’ eliminates much of the risks associated with the experimental nature of policy development. This is where evaluation ideally should—and is purported to—play a role in evidence-based policy. However, the experience of the presenters and many other evaluators suggests that evidence-based decisions that lead to development of policy are the exception rather than the norm. Indeed, it would seem that policy is often made without drawing on data or even despite the evidence of ‘what works’.

This is not to suggest that evaluations around policy issues are not carried out—they are. What may happen though, is that if the findings are considered to be politically sensitive, they may not be publicly released and they may be ignored in future decision making. In other cases, policy makers may ‘cherry-pick’ from evaluation findings only the evidence that supports the desired policy directions (Pawson 2006; Leigh 2009). Alternatively, the evaluation is commissioned, and if the findings are considered to be politically sensitive, they may not be publicly released or they may be ignored. A further possibility is that the department which commissioned the evaluation will restructure and the evaluation findings no longer have relevance. All of this suggests that too often, evidence-based policy making is little more than a myth and leads many to ask whether selective evidence is used to simply support policy (e.g. Coory 2004; Bryson and Mowbray 2005; Hughes 2007; Hunter 2009) or if the principal benefit of data ‘is to smooth the implementation process or silence the potential opponents of policy reform’ (Productivity Commission 2009b).

The purpose of this paper is to explore these questions in the light of the literature and the authors’ experiences of conducting evaluations in the Northern Territory context. After summarising themes in the literature, this paper discusses two examples of Northern Territory evaluations which demonstrate many of the issues noted by national and international researchers and policy makers. The impact of political processes, evaluation approaches and the interaction between those commissioning and those conducting evaluations is noted, and potential future directions to improve the impact of evaluations on policy development are suggested.

2. Literature review

Over recent years there has been much talk of the need for evidence-based policy. While in itself not a new idea, the focus of using evidence for policy making decisions was sharpened by the Blair government in the United Kingdom (Wells 2007), which

signified the entry of a government with a reforming and modernising mandate, which was committed to putting an end to ideologically-driven politics and replacing it instead with rational decision making. (Sutcliffe and Court 2005:1)

In Australia, the same sentiment was echoed by the newly elected Rudd government in 2007. The Prime Minister proclaimed: ‘I believe in evidence-based policy not just sort of grand statements.’ (Australian Broadcasting Commission 2007). The current Prime Minister more often uses the terms ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ alongside evidence (Gillard 2010) but there is still a strong commitment within the Australian Public Service to developing policy capability through partnerships with research organisations and academia (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration 2010). The demand for evidence among those who generate ideas and put them into action will continue to be strong, partly due to the perceived benefit to society that accrues from the application of credible evidence (Henry 2009).

2.1 Challenges of evidence-based policy

An extensive literature documents the challenges of evidence-based policy.

Rhetoric has so far largely exceeded the reality... Decision-makers accuse researchers of irrelevant, poorly communicated ‘products’; researchers accuse decision-makers of political expediency that results in irrational outcomes. (Lomas 2000:236)

Good policy development requires many types of evidence, from multiple sources, including values-based information as well as objective data (Rogers 2009). The development of evidence-based policy may be particularly difficult where Aboriginal stakeholders are involved, due to potential differences in values and context that need to be taken into account (Larkin 2006).

Evaluations would seem to have special relevance for evidence-based policy, as it is specifically designed to test the effectiveness of particular approaches. If 'all policy is experimentation' (Banks 2009:6), one would expect that evaluation might be seen as central to evidence-based policy. However, due in part to the prevalence of 'evaluations [that] are rushed, poorly planned, poorly executed or poorly funded' (O'Brien et al. 2010:442), as well as their frequent relegation to unpublished 'grey literature', many academics—and perhaps policy makers—regard evaluation as being lower in status than other forms of research informing policy.

Nevertheless, evaluations and evaluators continue to grow in number, although some may doubt how much value they add (Leeuw 2009). Studies on the impact of evaluations and the degree to which they are utilised remains one of the most common topics in the literature (Patton 2008; Johnson et al. 2009).

Many if not most evaluators accept the idea that, at least in part, the merit of their work—success or failure of their evaluation efforts—can be judged in terms of whether and how an evaluation is used. (Henry and Mark 2003:293-294).

Evaluations can impact at many levels. In addition to direct application of evaluation findings on policy or practice, evaluations may change participants' awareness and attitudes (Henry and Mark 2003), potentially leading to future policy changes. Our focus here is on the direct impact of evaluation on policy, either causing the development of new policy, or justifying existing policy (Chapman 2009 calls these 'Ms Pollyanna evidence' and 'Mr Hyde evidence, respectively).

2.2 The complex path from evaluation to policy

The path from evaluation to policy is complex, and often lengthy. As Edwards (2010) notes, it is affected by both 'supply side' and 'demand side' issues. On the 'demand' or policy maker side, in addition to ideological constraints, barriers to incorporating evaluation findings into policy development may include 'an anti-intellectual approach adopted within government [and] a risk-averse attitude to findings that practitioners could see as embarrassing to the Minister, resulting in a wariness of critical analysis' (Edwards 2005:68).

On the 'supply' or researcher side, evaluators may not understand policy contexts and processes, including the pace at which decisions are made. There may be 'impediments to researchers accessing data held within bureaucracies [or] insufficient effort by government in identifying and publicising policy priorities' (Edwards 2005:68). There is often tension between evaluative independence and the constraints placed upon evaluators by those funding them (Chelimsky 2008), sometimes resulting in strong pressures to rewrite evaluations to make them conform to funder expectations (Markiewicz 2008). Some of these cases result in evidence distorted to fit pre-determined policy positions. This is in addition to the inherent challenges of conducting effective evaluations that result in accurate findings, especially given the common desire of many program managers to make only positive evidence available to evaluators, in the fear that they may lose funding if more balanced evidence is presented (O'Brien et al. 2010).

Perhaps even more critical than either the 'supply side' or 'demand side' issues is the interaction between policy makers and evaluators. Nutley et al. (2007) note that it is the linkages between researchers and policy-makers that best predict research use, particularly face-to-face interactions. However, too often such linkages are hampered by public servants who are working under great pressure, without the time, background skills and support to develop and oversee appropriate evaluation contracts (Davidson 2010a). Public servants and evaluators working in these conditions may struggle to identify key evaluation questions and their policy implications, and to manage the translation of knowledge from evaluation findings and recommendations into policy improvements.

2.3 Improving evaluation effectiveness

Many suggestions have been made to improve the effectiveness of evaluations and better ensure their relevance to policy-makers. Findings from a review of 41 studies on evaluation use between 1986 and 2005 stressed the importance of 'stakeholder involvement' and 'evaluator competence', and many recommendations focus on these two areas (Johnson et al. 2009).

Proceedings from a recent round-table on evidence-based policy in Australia (Productivity Commission 2009b) warned against reliance on evaluations 'amounting to little more than examining processes and asking those involved what they thought about them' (Productivity Commission 2009a:47). More rigorous evaluation methodologies have been developed and are widely available, including tools such as:

- 'program logic' (Frechtling 2007), which enables stakeholders to build a shared understanding and common expectations of the project, identify what the evaluation questions should be and which performance measures are key, and ensure that the evaluation can create a 'performance story' that is able to legitimately attribute results to the project (McLaughlin and Jordan 2004);
- 'theory of change' models (see Patton 2008:336-349), designed to deal with complex social issues, requiring multiple interventions over time; and
- 'realist' or 'realistic evaluations' (Tilley 2000; Pawson 2006), which focus on context and mechanisms of change in order to generate hypotheses about how initiatives are working and for whom.

Evaluators who understand how to apply these methods, and their connection to the policy needs under consideration, are likely to produce more policy-relevant findings. However, finding such evaluators, and identifying the desired scope and focus of evaluations, presents additional challenges. There have been calls to move away from the current government preference for sending out tightly specified evaluation tenders, often developed by non-evaluators, and moving instead towards better ways of locating and negotiating with evaluators (Davidson 2010b)—focusing on their ability to manage changing policy contexts and working with government stakeholders.

2.4 Communicating findings

Communicating the findings of evaluations and linking them to policy improvement is another challenge (Davidson 2010c). Potential solutions to improve practice in this area include building ongoing partnerships between researchers and decision-makers, with mechanism such as seconding academics into public service environments to better understand the policy environment. This allows for identification of 'knowledge brokers' or 'boundary agencies' that can act as intermediaries between the disparate worlds of research and policy (Edwards 2010).

In summary, then, the gap between evaluation findings and their impact on policy is a frequent theme in the literature. However, although the dynamics of the paths between research and policy are complex, the substantial amount of recent interest in this topic in Australia as well as overseas has resulted in multi-pronged recommendations for improved practice. They range from those focused on evaluation methodologies to those which focus on government processes in commissioning and using evaluations. Above all, there is a strong consensus on the need to have more effective partnerships between researchers and decision-makers.

3. Case studies from the Northern Territory context

To show how issues noted in the international literature are reflected locally, we present two case studies. Both are drawn from the Northern Territory context and concern evaluations relevant to policy making decisions. The first comes from the field of family violence and the second from the field of child protection.

3.1 Case study 1: an evaluation of a family violence strategy

In 2005 a team of researchers from CDU were engaged to conduct an evaluation of the Northern Territory Government's family violence strategies. The first in a series of evaluations that CDU undertook over a three year period around the topic of domestic and family violence, this particular contract required the evaluation team to assess and make recommendations on the processes supporting a Territory-wide Strategy and a set of initiatives addressing family violence, focusing particularly on governance, capacity building and evidence-building processes.

The evaluation design comprised semi-structured interviews with 26 government stakeholders (who ranged from departmental heads to operational staff in seven Northern Territory government departments and one Australian Government department) and 21 representatives of non-government agencies across the Northern Territory, all involved in implementing or overseeing the implementation of anti-violence strategies. The 47 family violence program and strategy stakeholders advising process improvements anticipated that the twelve recommendations in the report would result in changes that would lead to increased capacity in the sector, better data collection systems and ongoing evaluation processes, better communication and improved governance arrangements.

So what happened? Shortly after the report was accepted, there were a number of staffing changes and a restructure within the section responsible for family violence policy. Later, the responsibility for domestic and family violence strategy was shifted to a different department within the Northern Territory Government. All of the personnel previously involved with policy and strategy development left—the Strategy which was the subject of the evaluation lapsed. There is now no official documentation available from the Northern Territory Government website which describes policy guidelines or a strategy. A message on the relevant page says: *This document is currently being updated to reflect changes in the Northern Territory Domestic and Family Violence Act.* The Act has been in operation for more than 18 months.

3.2 Case study 2: an evaluation of a pilot program to support families

In 2008 researchers from CDU were contracted to conduct an evaluation of a new pilot program (which had yet to be tendered) that would be designed to support 'high needs, low risk' families that had come to the attention of child protection services but who were not subject to investigation by the service. The evaluation team worked closely with those involved, initially in the policy development area of the department and subsequently with service providers and departmental managers.

A formative evaluation framework was constructed prior to the commencement of the program. The pilot commenced taking clients in early 2009 but considerable effort was put into developing practice guidelines ahead of the launch. The evaluators took on roles as critical friends and supported a number of reflective practice sessions with key stakeholders over a 12 month period ahead of a formal data collection process that involved a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures drawn from a variety of sources, including clients, the non-government service provider contracted to deliver the service, referrers and associated stakeholders, as well as government agency representatives.

The evaluation report was deliberately structured to support the rollout of the service across the Northern Territory. The findings and 19 recommendations were workshopped with a reference group to ensure they accurately reflected the intent of all those who contributed. The recommendations were to a large extent adopted and the service has now commenced operation in three major centres across the Northern Territory.

4. Why the difference?

The two cases differed in the 'demand side' context and the 'supply side' context as well as the interaction between the researchers and those commissioning the evaluation.

4.1 Demand side issues

The political context was quite different in the two cases. In the first case, it appears clear in retrospect that policy change regarding approaches to family violence was already underway, even as the evaluation was commissioned. Originally placed within the Department of the Chief Minister—signifying its high profile and priority at a whole-of-government level—elements of the Domestic and Aboriginal Family Violence Strategy were being moved to operational areas as the evaluation team was preparing to deliver its final report.

One of the issues was that the time between commissioning the evaluation (mid 2005) and delivery of the final report (mid 2007) was so long that the policy priorities had changed and therefore the relevance of the report was not as great as it would have been at the beginning of the evaluation process. By the time the report was accepted, the policy-makers were anticipating different answers to those that were provided by the evaluation, a development which the public servants managing the evaluation did not address in the contract. This mismatch in expectations likely contributed to the report's failure to substantially inform the direction of policy.

In the second case, the political context led to a relatively stable policy environment. Child protection has been the subject of intense interest since 2006 (ABC 2006). Coronials in 2009 and a new Inquiry in 2010, building on the momentum created by the *Little Children are Sacred* report (Wild and Anderson 2007) and the Northern Territory Emergency Response which followed it, maintained pressure to find better ways to support at-risk families in order to prevent child abuse. If anything, the development of programs such as the one evaluated became an even higher government priority over the course of the evaluation. The scalability of the program was therefore an important question for the government, and an answer was genuinely desired.

4.2 Supply side issues

Although highly experienced researchers, in 2005 the CDU team members had less experience in evaluation. Reflecting back after five additional years of experience, the methodology chosen was probably better suited to research than to evaluation. Evaluation practices such as the development of a theory of change model were not employed. While the evaluation did engage directly with several departmental heads, with hindsight, it may have been helpful for the evaluation team to attempt to engage directly with ministers responsible for the portfolios represented under the whole of government approach which underpinned the evaluation design.

The researchers in 2005 were also less experienced in government processes, including the speed at which policy decisions could be made, and the signs that policy changes were underway. Governments are particularly unlikely to publicise the termination of strategies, and the researchers in 2005 were inexperienced in reading the subtle signs of such developments.

By 2008, the situation was very different. The researchers had considerable experience in evaluations and in particular in working with the government area concerned. The evaluation framework was being built into the program from its inception, and the right set of stakeholders (which included policy development staff) were involved in determining the evaluation questions. A mixed methods approach ensured that a variety of data sources informed evaluation findings.

4.3 Interaction issues

In the first case, the 2005 relationship between the evaluators and those commissioning the evaluation was essentially one of purchaser-provider. The evaluation process was not underpinned by an altogether clear scope of work or evaluation framework. The public servants were available to provide comments on drafts, and make suggestions for changes, but their capacity to use the evaluation to inform policy was somewhat limited. This was in part due to the departmental restructures that were going on around them, which

included a change of Chief Minister. In effect they had lost connection with those who were running with policy in their area.

It is unclear the extent to which those commissioning the evaluation recognised how much the policy context was changing as it progressed. In an ideal world, they would have acted as intermediaries between the evaluators and the policy-makers, identifying the policy questions most important to address through evaluation, developing a contract that reflected those priorities, tracking policy changes over the course of the evaluation and adjusting its focus accordingly, and ensuring that all of those concerned had similar expectations of the evaluation's focus. That did not occur. The lack of effective communication between the policy makers, those commissioning the evaluation, and the researchers was perhaps the single biggest factor in the failure of this evaluation to effectively impact on policy.

In 2008, the relationship between the evaluators and those commissioning the evaluation was much more a partnership. Working relationships had been developed while conducting previous evaluations between 2005 and 2008 and there was something of an 'evaluation culture' within this area of child protection services. Over a period of three years, the researchers had established credibility with some of the key government stakeholders, and there was greater familiarity among all stakeholders of methods such as reflective practice, and recognition that good evidence was more than data. In short, the staff involved in the policy were much better prepared for evaluation and were ready to embrace what the evaluators had to offer.

5. Where to from here?

The two cases of Northern Territory evaluations discussed here demonstrate many of the themes noted in the Australian and international literature, showing the impact of political processes, evaluation approaches and the style of interaction between researchers and those commissioning evaluations. If, as the international literature demonstrates, truly evidence-based policy making is a rare and beautiful thing, how can the Northern Territory improve its chances of achieving it?

It is important to recognise that some factors impacting negatively on the ability of evaluations to affect policy cannot be changed. In a representative democracy, the optimal role for evidence is to inform policy; it does not determine policy:

Policy decisions will typically be influenced by much more than objective evidence, or rational analysis. Values, interests, personalities, timing, circumstance and happenstance—in short, democracy—determine what actually happens. (Banks 2009:3)

Given that, what can and should change to enable better evidence-based policy making in the Northern Territory? We suggest that both those commissioning and those conducting evaluations have a role to play here.

Evaluators could improve their focus on the policy implications of their assessments, making linkages to policy directions more transparent in their reports, and engaging more with policy actors throughout the course of the evaluation, particularly in the development and reporting stages. To effectively influence policy, evaluators need to have a good grasp of the policy context and actors, gained through training or perhaps through personal experience in policy development processes. Evaluators also need to more effectively communicate their findings in ways that connect to issues that have currency in the policy-making domain.

Much evaluation is designed to be 'utilization focused' (Patton 2008) on practice improvement. A different approach is often required to inform policy. To increase the number of evaluators with the required skill sets, the Australasian Evaluation Society may play an important role. Influencing policy is seen as an important part of the 10 year mission of the Society: 'To see rigorous evaluation as central to policy development, program design and service delivery' (Australasian Evaluation Society Inc. 2010:6).

For those commissioning evaluations, the greatest improvements are likely to occur where government areas recognise the linkage of evaluations to policy directions, where staff are supported in obtaining the skills required to successfully manage and implement evaluations, and where longer term, more interactive relationships between government staff and researchers are encouraged. This may mean regularly including evaluation experience and expertise as a desirable criterion in policy-related job descriptions, support for staff training and development in evaluation-related topics, and perhaps a more widespread use of internal evaluation units. These units would be able to support in-house documentation and assessments but also manage relationships with independent external evaluators when required.

The process of commissioning evaluations could also be improved. Instead of using a tender process to select an evaluation team, it may be more useful to follow Davidson's (2010b) advice and ask for an Expression of Interest that focuses on the evaluator's capacity to identify and address the policy implications of their work. The tender process too often focuses on methodological details and costings, or encourages a generic application, and is less suited to identifying how evaluators will manage challenging policy contexts.

Guidelines that allow the evaluators to disseminate and publish their work (excluding confidential details) will make the work more attractive to academics, and also alleviate any ethical concerns some evaluators may have about taking knowledge from participants without being allowed to pass findings back to them. Contracts that do not end with report submission, but continue through the 'knowledge translation' phase of implementation may also be worth considering. Many other mechanisms could be trialled to ensure evaluation-related expertise within government, and policy-related experience within evaluation teams, including more frequent secondments of public servants to research agencies and vice versa. This would improve capacity to work on critical joint tasks, such as identifying evaluation parameters and design in order to ensure that findings are relevant to policy needs, and reviewing them to reflect emerging changes in policy context. However, the first step is the most critical—an acknowledgement by both government and researchers that evidence-based policy is a priority. It follows then that evaluation is a critical component of evidence-based policy, and there ought to be a commitment to work together to achieve it.

6. Conclusions

The need for credible evidence in the development of sound public policy is rarely disputed. However, international literature and our own experience as evaluators in the Northern Territory show that all too often, evaluation reports are commissioned, accepted and left on the shelf to gather dust. Despite the evidence they contain, they are 'cherry-picked' for the evidence that supports a particular view. Other evidence is discarded. In some cases, evaluators are pressured to distort their findings to fit a particular policy position. In preparing this paper we found it easier to find examples demonstrating the difficulty of evaluation evidence being effectively used than to find examples demonstrating a strong connection between the evidence and the development of policy.

Two case studies presented here reflect the themes in the literature about the challenges of building evidence-based policy. These challenges, particularly in the first case study, include 'demand side' issues such as a changing policy context, 'supply side' issues such as methodology, and 'relationship' issues such as a breakdown in communication between policy makers, the public servants managing the evaluation, and the evaluators. However, as noted in the second case, when the context, relational, supply and demand issues are addressed it is possible to achieve an outcome where evidence is incorporated into the emerging policy. We presented suggestions for addressing the issue, looking again at the three areas of 'supply side' issues, 'demand side' issues, and 'relationship' issues. Suggestions include: more training in this area for evaluators and public servants; building in dissemination guidelines that emphasise transparency; using of a different style of commissioning evaluations; and locating experienced evaluators. Consideration should also be given to development of a relationship that extends past the submission of a report into the 'knowledge translation' phase of the evaluation.

We do not purport to have all the answers about how to make evaluation more effective as a tool for building evidence-based policy. No doubt the suggestions we make are contestable, and have their own limitations—and indeed we would invite feedback from others on the issues we have raised. However, the goal of achieving policy that is well-informed by credible evaluation evidence is possible, and can be supported by structures and processes that both evaluators and commissioners of evaluation can promote.

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