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Issues and Challenges in Using Evidence in Policy Development and Delivery

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Thank you very much for the invitation to speak here today; it really goes without saying that I think that the topic of the use of evidence in policy development and delivery is of great importance and merits such a high profile event. I think great credit goes to DCSF for organising the conference.

I want to structure what I have to say over the next ten minutes or so in the form of a number of propositions. Some of this might be seen as rather controversial but it is design to provoke discussion.

So, proposition one: *In discussion and debate about the impact of research evidence on policy, there is a lack of clarity about what we are seeking to achieve.*

There has been considerable dispute over the terms ‘evidence-based policy making’ and ‘evidence-informed policy making’ and some critics (or perhaps cynics) have introduced the term ‘policy-based evidence’. I think there are two key problems underpinning this dispute. First, given the complexity and lack of transparency around the way in which evidence is actually used in policy development and delivery, we have a weak and contested evidence base on this and a tendency to generalise from limited and particular circumstances. Second, there is a tendency to conflate the empirical and the normative – to conflate what *is* the case with what we feel *should be* the case. So, for example, with reference to situations where there are severe limitations on the use of evidence to inform policy, our ambitions and aspirations for the use of evidence are easily downscaled into what Ray Pawson calls the ‘...thin-lipped, prissy and politically correct...’¹ notion of evidence-informed policy making. We need a clearer understanding of the way evidence is used and its impact in different circumstances and a clearer articulation of the rationale for strengthening its use. Of course this rationale speaks to ‘Enlightenment values’ and we can recall Lindblom’s famous reference to the ‘tattered flag of the Enlightenment’ – it may be tattered but I believe it still provides a banner under which we can march towards a better society.

Proposition two: *We underestimate the extent to which the work of government is informed by evidence due to some important misconceptions.*

Discussion about the use of research evidence has tended to be dominated by a ‘reductionist’ conception, emphasising the research ‘product’ (typically the report or paper), a narrow conception of ‘scientific evidence’, the role of individuals in the two worlds of ‘research’ and ‘policy’ and what is termed ‘instrumental use’ – the direct use of research findings to inform specific policy decisions. This is now increasingly acknowledged to be a

¹ Pawson, R. (2006) *Evidence-Based Policy Making a Realist Perspective*, London: Sage Publications, p.viii.

misconception. First, we recognise the validity of various forms of evidence (or ‘valid knowledge’), particularly practitioners’ experiential or ‘tacit’ knowledge and the views of customers and citizens. Second, there is considerable complexity around what we define as ‘policy’ – it’s not just specific instruments, measures or legislation, but covers a wide gamut of activities and processes from background ideas, through problem definition, development of strategies, specific instruments, implementation and review. Therefore, much of the work in government that applies analysis and evidence in such activities and processes is ‘hidden’ – especially the work of analytical services. Third, we now recognise the importance of what Carol Weiss called ‘conceptual’ impact (or ‘enlightenment’) – the broader influence of the body of social scientific knowledge on ‘policy thinking’, on ideas for new policy themes and approaches. The problem here, of course, is that this is very difficult to identify and measure and as Professor Paul Wiles, the Government’s Chief Social Scientific Adviser, recently argued at an Academy of Social Science conference, ministers and policy officials are often not aware of such influences.

So, the bottom line, I think, is a tendency to misconceive just how much the work of government is ‘knowledge informed’. It’s worth referring, for example, to the conclusions from tranche three of the Capability Reviews, which found “...a strong evidence and analysis base, which is routinely used to inform policy development, with analysts and economists working alongside policy developers...”² More generally, Geoff Mulgan has argued: “In politics, as in other fields, all progress comes from new knowledge and ideas...”³

Proposition three: *Research evidence can rarely provide the definitive word.*

Social science rarely provides unequivocal causal evidence to provide ministers with total confidence that a particular new policy intervention will work when implemented out there in a complex and messy world. The more robust the causal evidence, the more specific and limited will be the conditions around its validity and the more caution needed in applying it to future policy intervention. Most policy-relevant evidence derives from non-experimental research, requires considerable caution in interpretation and therefore is often hedged around with caveats. And a general point: research evidence by its nature relates to what has happened in the past and we have to interpret from this guidance for action to change the future. Finally, and very importantly, such decisions about what we should do to change the future involve value judgements; if we’re lucky and diligent, evidence can help to get us some way down the road to understanding the likely feasibility and effectiveness (and cost-effectiveness) of a proposed policy intervention but in many policy areas questions around values play a key role in the judgement as to ‘what it is desirable to do’.

I think a key implication here is the need for a degree of caution in our approach to policy making, recognising that policies are hypotheses and policy interventions are essentially experiments that need to be tested in practice – through trialling and piloting where feasible, and through careful monitoring and evaluation. We can see that this approach has

² Cabinet Office (2007) *Capability Reviews Tranche 3: Findings and Common Themes: Civil Service Strengths and Challenges*, p.26.

³ Mulgan, G. ((2007) *Good and Bad Power: The Ideals and Betrayals of Government*, London: Penguin Books, p.30.

been developed over recent years to some degree but we are a long way from the 'experimenting society' advocated by Donald Campbell.

Proposition four: *The research community is equivocal about the 'research impact' agenda.*

It is clearly important to the cause of 'evidence-based policy making' that there is a high degree of commitment in the research community to undertaking policy-relevant research and playing a pro-active role in promoting the use of such research in policy development and delivery. Government policy increasingly emphasises this, as can be seen in the *Higher Ambitions* framework, the proposals for including impact in the new Research Excellence Framework and the policies of the Research Councils in relation to grant awards. However, these proposals have generated considerable dispute in the academic community, with many academics extremely hostile to the impact agenda on the grounds that (to quote Sally Hunt of the UCU) it "...amounts to an attack on basic or 'curiosity-driven' research..." and "...threatens to wreck the very basis of innovation in knowledge."⁴ We might say that, in relation to the impact and knowledge transfer agenda, the academic community divides into three camps: the evangelists, the agnostics and the sceptics. There is a double challenge here: first to convince more of the agnostics and sceptics of the validity and importance of the impact agenda; but importantly second, to build the skills and expertise in the academic community to promote the use of their research. Thinking about the task of such capacity building, we might also reflect on the importance of building trust and credibility as a key foundation for taking the impact agenda forward – recent events around the climate change agenda have brought this issue into sharp focus.

Proposition five: *The policy-making process is not always evidence-friendly, let alone evidence-hungry, and sometimes appears evidence-averse.*

In relation to this issue, it is customary to quote John Maynard Keynes on how much politicians dislike evidence because it makes their lives more complicated and difficult. The recent issues around the IPCC's evidence on climate change prompted the *Sunday Times* to reflect: "Science and public policy can be uncomfortable bedfellows....Politicians, we know, can play fast and loose with 'expert' evidence."⁵ And the sacking of Professor David Nutt as chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs attracted passionate criticism in the *Observer*:

"...British politics – and our culture – is increasingly being disfigured by politicians bowing to prejudice...Britain is losing its way, unmoored from its tradition of fair play, debate and respect for facts. Nutt's sacking was another milestone in Britain's progression from a great Enlightenment country into a place where prejudice reigns."⁶

Clearly, the accusation of hyperbole might just be relevant but there is a serious issue here. In part it relates to what I said earlier about the necessary role of value judgements in policy making and this needs to be acknowledged. But beyond that there are some areas of policy

⁴ *Times Higher Education*, No. 1925, 3rd December 2009, p.26.

⁵ *Sunday Times*, 31st January, 2009.

⁶ *The Observer*, 1st November, 2009.

where ‘political imperative’ would appear to reign over evidence, for example crime and drugs – witness the controversy of the classification of cannabis in 2008 – and the development and implementation of party manifesto commitments. The key question concerns the extent to which the evidence is assessed and weighed against political considerations or, alternatively, ignored or even suppressed. The former seems quite legitimate to me – after all, politicians are elected and accountable – but the latter certainly is not. There have been allegations of such manipulative behaviour, for example by the Home Office in relation to policy on crime and criminal justice⁷ but it is difficult to know just how valid these are. Certainly, in the light of what I have said about the use of evidence in government, the generalisation that ‘prejudice reigns’ and that ‘evidence-based policy has been transmuted into policy-based evidence’ seems to be a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater

Proposition six: *In seeking to enhance the impact of research on policy, ‘players and processes’ are more important than ‘product’.*

As I argued in proposition two, our thinking about research impact has focused too much on research products and on the role of individuals in knowledge transfer. Recent research has highlighted the importance of the organisational and inter-organisational context of knowledge transfer and, in particular, of processes of communication and relationship-building in networks. Thus, a recent report from the Council for Science and Technology argued that “...building formal and informal networks that promote mutual understanding and awareness between Government and academia is crucial.”⁸ Similarly, research undertaken by the ESRC has highlighted the importance of developing and sustaining ongoing relationships in networks and has underpinned the development of a ‘co-production’ model. In my view, work in the area still fails adequately to address organisational and institutional issues and, in particular, to understand complexity in this respect *within* government. I believe that the crucial role played by government analysts (social researchers, economists, statisticians, operational researchers) and scientific advisers is not fully appreciated, not just in terms of the research and analysis that they undertake and expertise they provide, but as ‘knowledge brokers’ working in those networks I referred to earlier and as ‘advocates for evidence’ in discussions with policy officials and ministers around policy development. A key concern, then, is that the role of analysts and expert advisers continues to be strengthened with adequate resources and appropriate professional development.

Proposition seven: *Greater openness and transparency are crucial to enhance the prospects for more ‘intelligent government’.*

Over recent years I have become rather steeped in the work of John Dewey, in my view the greatest American philosopher and a key figure in the development of the pragmatist school of philosophy. In relation to the debate on ‘evidence-based’ policy making I have found Dewey’s notion of ‘intelligence’ to be pertinent, which refers to the capacity to apply knowledge to guide us in taking appropriate action in situations characterised not just by

⁷ Hope, T. and Walters, R. (2008) *Critical Thinking About the uses of Research*, Centre for Criminal Justice Studies, Kings College, London

⁸ Council for Science and Technology (2008) *How Academia and Government Can Work Together*, London: CST.

uncertainty but also by moral and ethical ambiguity. Such a capacity is not just a matter of gathering and applying scientific evidence – important though that is – but also of harnessing relevant experiential knowledge or ‘practical wisdom’, tacit knowledge and ‘know-how’ and promoting wide public discussion and debate to provide the foundation for what Stephen Toulmin calls ‘reasonable decisions’ that can help us “...in untying the knots in which our lives enmesh us...”⁹ It is, admittedly, a rather idealistic conception and some might argue that the concept of ‘intelligent government’ is an oxymoron! However, if we do accept it as an ideal to strive for (under that ‘tattered flag of the Enlightenment’) then I would argue that a key issue focuses on the role of greater openness, transparency and accountability in promoting ‘appropriate’ behaviour and action in government. We have seen the power of this in relation to MP’s expenses. Government departments and agencies do publish statistical material and reports of commissioned research quite extensively but how much further could they go in publishing material detailing the evidence and analysis used in policy making and promoting public debate – and would this encourage more ‘intelligent’ government?

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⁹ Toulmin, S. (2001) *Return to Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.