Evidence-Based Policies and Indicator Systems:
From Profane Arithmetic to a Sacred Geometry?¹

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John Maynard Keynes advised that “there is nothing a Government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult” (Skidelsky, 1980, II: 630). Most British readers will probably confirm the validity of this observation over the past half century. This author recalls a junior government minister who had ‘Don’t give me the facts: my mind’s made up already’ prominently displayed on his desk, no doubt for the benefit of his officials and lobbyists. There is also a tale of a group of health service researchers who, a year after the introduction of GP fund-holding (an early 1990s regime of devolved budgets to general medical practitioners), wrote to the Department of Health to suggest that it might be opportune to conduct an evaluation but were told politely that as fund-holding was now policy there was no need of evaluation. And towards the close in 1997 of the Conservative administration a Home Secretary (Interior Minister) was overheard receiving his official briefing on crime statistics and appreciating their attempt, which he admitted had been unsuccessful, to make an honest man of him!

In perhaps deliberate contrast, as Davies and Nutley (Paper #7) remind us, one of the incoming Labour Government’s dicta has been: what matters is what works! The new Prime Minister told senior civil servants in October 1998 that “for the public what matters is what is achieved”. Thus “across the world a revolution is underway to refocus government on outcomes: cutting crime, cutting unemployment, improving health, improving education. We are already part of that revolution” (Blair, 1998). As the papers in this collection show, the concern with what works in not confined to the UK. Indeed much of its origin can be traced to the heady rationalist days of the American 1960s (Weiss, #25). But what can we discern about its reincarnation?

Evidence based public policy and practice in the United Kingdom?

Even before its election, the Labour Party had stressed that it would keep those of its predecessor’s innovations that worked and change those that did not. In 1997 this looked like a renaissance of political pragmatism over conviction politics. But it also raised a fundamental question: how would the Government tell the difference between what did and did not work? In Labour’s designer revolution a flood of policy proposals has come with an enhanced commitment not only to policy evaluation but also explicitly to the development of evidence based public policies. British government policies are in reality ministerial, not parliamentary let alone public. So, the revolution has to overcome the demand for and use of evaluation being motivated by political criteria.

How are matters developing in the UK? Certainly there are some early developments consistent with the new evidence-based thrust. The Health Service now has the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (about which more below) and other agencies to drive its evidence-based medicine, and the Outcome Development Steering Group and the extension of hospital league tables to reinforce the focus on outcomes. Local government has been released from compulsory competitive tendering (market testing) and charged instead to realise and demonstrate (i.e., through evidence) best value for its communities (Cm. 4310, 1999). And most striking of all during 2002 there have been very large increases in public funding especially for education, health and transport. Thus, if rhetoric and expenditure commitment were sufficient tests, New Labour’s initiatives would indicate a considerable turn-round.

Yet evidence-based policy requires a fundamental shift in the habits of government. First, changing the government

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in the UK has usually meant changing the
greater part of public policy and
management: old programmes have to
overcome guilt by association with the former
regime and new administrations like to justify
putting ‘under new management’ over the
shop. Thus 1945, 1951, 1964, 1970 and
especially 1979 saw wide-ranging changes
to the structures and processes of
government. Evidence-based policy implies
that all this is to stop. Second, evidence-
based policy has to overcome memories of
the rationality in government adventures and
débacles of the late 1960s and early 1970s:
planning failures and public expenditure
mismangement that Mrs Thatcher’s
government was dedicated to debunking.

If the new Labour Government has a
talisman of its shift it is probably the National
Institute for Clinical Evidence (NICE). Set up
under the Government’s first policy
pronouncement for the National Health
Service (Cm. 3807, 1997), NICE is
responsible for implementing clinical audit,
promoting clinical and cost effectiveness,
appraising treatments, formulating policies
on national drug prescribing and developing
PRODIGY (a computer based support for
general practitioners’ prescribing decisions).
Its Board comprises representatives of
clinicians, patients and other users, NHS
managers and research bodies. Its Partners’
Council is structured to embrace all key
stakeholders. To gain its effects it works
through the authorities and trusts that
provide and commission care as well as local
user representatives and the Royal Colleges,
professional associations and others
involved in research and development. The
aim is to replace the sometimes ad hoc
judgements of the closed professional world
of clinical practice with transparent,
evidence-based and implementable
decisions.

The core idea in this research-led NHS goes
back at least to the Conservative
administration in the early 1990s when Sir
Michael Peckham was Director of the
Research and Development for the NHS. But
Labour has undoubtedly not only
institutionalised the policy in the NHS but has
committed itself to spreading it throughout
the public sector. This includes the Cabinet
Office where the Centre for Management
and Policy Studies is responsible for
research and development under a
permanent secretary (grade one
appointment), Professor Ron Aman, formerly
chief executive of the national Economic and
Social Research Council. Thus the thrust is
broadly based and resourced.

Towards a sacred geometry of
evidence-based policy: lessons from
the papers

There are plenty of sceptics of these
developments in the UK and worldwide, i.e.
those who think that evidence-based policy
is a profane arithmetic, a measuring of the
unmeasurable, a science that does not add
up. The papers in this volume go some way
to demonstrate not only the commitment to
the development of evidence based policy
but also the considerable efforts to underpin
policy work with a scientifically grounded
evidential base.

In order to enhance accessibility to the
considerable variety of scope and
contribution of the papers collected here we
have employed two devices. The first, in the
absence of an organising principle for
correlling papers when presented at the
original conference, is to set out the papers
alphabetically by author rather than impose
any groupings on the collection. The second,
a corollary of the first, is to provide an
accessible characterisation of the papers by
developing and employing a multi-
dimensional framework of properties (see
Annex below). This framework has two
further functions. First, it facilitates an
overview of the sum of the collection and its
parts (as in the Annex). Second it allows the
reader the opportunity to follow a variety of
pathways through the papers depending on
interest. For example, a reader may track a
particular policy area, aim, method or issue
through the papers. Of course, the
framework is essentially subjective, both in
its categorisation and its codification.
However, this very subjectivity may help to
engage readers by challenging them to test
its validity.

The overview confirms the wide-ranging
characteristics of the papers. Authors are
predominantly academic but some are
service managers and other practitioners.
Perhaps surprisingly, these authors are
reluctant to provide information about the
funding for their projects (should not authors
always be transparent about this?). Less
surprisingly, given the pioneering work of the
CEM centre, education is specifically
featured in 17 of the 27 papers. Health is
specifically covered in five, criminal justice in

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four, and housing and road safety one each. British policies are featured in 13 papers, the USA in 4, Australia in 3, and Finland, Hong Kong, and New Zealand in one each. Perhaps more promising for their synthetic potential, three papers are avowedly comparative, drawing evidence internationally. Predominantly the papers aim to provide explanation, evaluation or prescription but about a quarter seek to provide description or reflection. Methods are also eclectic with literature reviews and surveys prominent in about half the papers. Trials feature in four papers but are also referred to in other papers including the case studies of collaborative systematic reviews. The principal values of papers in the collection include their direct contributions to evidence or synthetic reviews of it (11), to indicator development (13) to practice development within a service (7) and to the development of research itself (5).

Some issues in the development of evidence-based policy

A few papers are in essence critical reviews and hint at various issues such as the relationship between evidence and policy and its methodological basis. It is these issues that give some comfort to those sceptical about the development of evidence-based policy.

At the heart of this scepticism is perhaps the relationship between evidence and policy. In suggesting that they would prefer the use of the terms evidence-influenced or evidence-aware to evidence-based, Davies and Nutley (#7) are hinting at the underlying issue of the potential and appropriate relationships between evidence and policy. It is possible analytically to distinguish the following relationships between evidence and policy:

- a. evidence-ignorant policy: policy not even aware of relevant evidence;
- b. evidence-aware policy: policy cognisant of but not using evidence;
- c. evidence-informed policy: policy considering but not substantially shaped by evidence;
- d. evidence-influenced policy: policy changed in some identifiable way by evidence;
- e. evidence-led policy: policy that is for the greater part shaped and embedded in evidence about goals and options and outcomes.

Of these, we can put aside evidence-ignorant and evidence-aware as negative senses of evidence-based policy. As to the others, the positive senses, there are no doubt evangelists who will argue that the promotion of evidence-based policies should in essence be about the realisation of evidence-led policy. We should be wary here. Some papers, including that by McCord (#15), point out the perversity of some evidence-led policies in practice. Others also point out the need to respect the democratic element in public policy formation and implementation.

Moreover, even in their most positive tones a number of papers (e.g. Boruch #4, Farrington #10, McCord #15, Weiss #25) hint at the huge technical demands on the scientific community if any of these positive relationships are to be realised. The scale and risks in the endeavour to inform the Democrat programme in the 1960s seem to have tempered even Weiss’ euphoria at the time! In the UK we might argue that the last quarter of the twentieth century in general undermined the scientific community’s capacity and capability to perform this systemic role as an informer in the policy process. One critique of the Conservative years, for example, argued that the principal technical failing was the dismantling of analytical capacity and capability in government (Foster & Plowden 1996). Such an impoverishment may take time and investment to remedy.

This investment may be required if only to address the methodological demands of realising evidence-based policy. The paradigm of the new evaluation appears to be evidence-based medicine and its reliance on the randomised control trial (RCT). Whatever its merits in the context of medicine and natural science, RCT is unlikely to be widely applicable or feasible in social and related policy. It is also possible that if it is set as the gold standard, the pursuit of such perfection could turn out to be the enemy of evaluative performance as the criteria for evidence-based policy are reliability and timeliness rather more than the validity required for pure research. This reasoning is at the heart of Realistic Evaluation, Pawson & Tilley’s major contribution to the philosophy and methodology of evaluation (1997). For them,
evaluation has to be methodologically realist by seeking explanation which is not simply driven by 'method' and 'measurement', but which suggests a more extensive role for theory (p. xiii) and realistic in accepting the orientation of applied research that is "not performed for the benefit of science as such, but pursued to inform the thinking of policy" (p. xiii, emphasis in original). Methodologically the distinction between realistic evaluation and RCT is the emphasis in the former on context as summed up neatly in their phrase 'what works for whom in what circumstances'.

Such technical factors were not among Leicester's seven enemies of evidence-based policy (1999). But plenty of organisational and political factors were, including bureaucratic logic and its ally the traditions of public service culture, a more recent fixation with the bottom line, the lack of time or capacity to think and a general world weary cynicism. If valid his analysis suggests that our policy processes may also have to address organisational factors in managing knowledge and its use in decisions especially if the benefits of evidence are to be exploited in creativity (Bichard 1999).

Leicester also cited some political factors including the political need for consensus and practical politics. We have already suggested that public policy is perhaps a misnomer, for at least in the British case policies are essentially ministerial property on which evidence has not made much impact in the past. Ministers are likely to find little sacred about evidence-based policy if it does not deliver. Whether the realisation of forms of evidence-based policy has significant implications for the democratic and other qualities of the policy process depends partly on the contribution to it of formal evaluation and audit. The latter has some spectacular failures to its name in both the public (HC 154, 1993-4) and private sectors (Enron and others). Might not evidence-based policy fail similarly? Even if it does not, it may still suffer guilt by association as part of the audit society in which the force to check has overruled the force to trust (Power, 1997). Power's argument is that this state of affairs is the result of a generation of fiscal restraint, a shift towards ideological reduction of the scope of state and the concomitant increased status afforded to managerial process over content in the public sector. As a result service values and activities are shaped to be amenable to their checking. This imposes a very real constraint on the freedom and capacity to innovate and deliver added value (and, it must be recognised, the corollary - to make a botch of things).

This tendency to set targets, inspect and allocate blame, puts at risk the knowledge generating potential of evidence-based policy (Wiggins & Tymms #26). The risk is aggravated by the dogmatic who argue that conviction does not need evaluation and by the pragmatic who hold that in a world of contract governance a good programme is one for which a deal has been struck. There is thus a danger that Labour's dictum, 'what matter's is what works', may easily become 'what matters is that it is shown to work'.

Conclusion

To end on such a note would be unduly pessimistic. As Weiss observes (#25), not all politics are insidious. Moreover there are substantive signs of improved wellbeing. These papers show more evaluative activity directly commissioned by and for government as part of a search for evidence of what works, how and when. It is also a more visible activity. Further, as we have seen, government is more engaged with and prepared to support evaluation communities including in its delivery agencies, the academic community and professional associations across the world. These improvements may be traced in part to the relative failures of the quasi markets of the early 1990s to provide evaluations in themselves and to their functional approach to services that aggravated gaps in provision. The remedy, a more systematic approach to the collection and dissemination of evidence for the policy process, brings a tough challenge. But so far, as this volume shows, there has also been a concerted and substantive response from both the commissioning and providing sides of the evidence-based relationship. The real test comes perhaps when sacred policy cows are contradicted by evidence.

References


Blair T, 1998, 'Modernising Central Government', speech to Senior Civil
Servants at Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre, October, Cabinet Office: London


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1 “In nature, we find patterns, designs and structures... These inevitably follow geometrical archetypes, which reveal to us the nature of each form... They are also symbolic of the underlying metaphysical principle of the inseparable relationship of the part to the whole. It is this principle of oneness underlying all geometry that permeates the architecture of all form in its myriad diversity.” (Rawles 2002)

2 Some of the ideas presented in this introduction draw on collaborative work with Professor Bill Jenkins of the University of Kent at Canterbury (including Gray and Jenkins 2002).

3 The idea of such a framework has at least two sources. The first is a book by Richard Saul Wurman on *Information Anxiety* (1989) which not only draws attention to failings in communicating data but also is itself an exemplar of accessible data. The second is work undertaken by the author as a member of a team advising the National Audit Office in the early 1990s on the systematic codification of value for money studies in order to facilitate the development of synthetic evidential bases.