

Good policy starts with the facts



When Tony Blair's Labour Party came to power in Britain in 1997, it was determined to bring an empirical, rather than an ideological, approach to policy-making.

"Somewhere on the journey from Opposition to government, a New Labour mantra emerged," observes Prof. William Solesbury of the University of London. "The only thing that matters now is: What works?"

The new government indicated that

it would expect a lot from its policy-makers. In a White Paper, it called for "more new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, better use of evidence and research in policy-making." In short, after years of Thatcherism, Blair was determined to return to a more pragmatic, practical approach to public policy development.

But when it turned to social scientists for solid evidence on which it could base policy decisions, it found to its surprise that the cupboard was bare. Academic research, particularly in the social sciences, was often poorly written, lacked clear conclusions and was of limited applicability for policy-makers. It was neither useful nor useable.

The disconnect between policy-makers and the social-science community is not unique to Britain. In fact, getting good evidence on which to base policy has become a major chal-

lenge for government in most western countries. And it has given rise to a new movement to promote "evidence-based decision-making."

Researchers and policy-makers from a half-dozen countries met recently in Wellington, New Zealand to compare notes on evidence-based decision making and share best practices. They discussed the state of research in fields as widely dispersed as education, health and corrections, and whether available information can be usefully applied to policy decision-making. They found that two major challenges face those who are trying to bring social science research to bear on public policy.

First, many policy-makers are more interested in their own ideology than in the evidence. As a result, they are not looking for new data, particularly if it challenges their own preconceived ideas. In this kind of atmosphere, there is not much incentive for either public servants or academics to bring forward evidence that does not support the accepted wisdom.

Second, many academics are not well-attuned to (or interested in) the preoccupations facing politicians and, as a result, their research is often neither useful nor usable. Furthermore, public-policy issues often cut across traditional academic lines. Data are of-

ten hard to get and do not always lend themselves to good statistical analysis. As a result, the most relevant issues are often very difficult to get at. And many university-based academics argue that their research agenda should not be driven by public policy concerns in any event.

The movement for evidence-based decision-making signals a potential change in the relationship between decision-makers, policy-makers within government, and the research community. In the first instance, political leaders will have to create an environment that encourages researchers to "speak truth to power" — even at the risk of hearing some unwanted messages. Decision-makers will also have to support experimentation, encourage rigorous evaluations and accept the fact that some experiments will fail. If the culture they demand is "never fail," you can be sure there won't be much innovative or radical thinking coming forward.

Policy-makers — the policy wonks in the public service — will have to learn to look for expertise from all quarters: the academic community, the consulting community and think-tanks.

But it is perhaps among the research community that the new emphasis on evidence-based decision-making could

have its biggest impact. In particular, there is a call for more relevance, for wider distribution of research findings, and a special call for academics to try to demonstrate how their findings could be of use to decision-makers.

One new concrete step in Britain was the creation by the government of the Economic and Social Research Council — a clear sign from government that the current output from the social-science community is not adequate for its purposes (see www.esrc.ac.uk).

In Canada, the federally funded Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council has identified some policy areas — including "the new economy," "public-private partnerships" and "health information" — in which it will provide strategic funding for academics who undertake work in these areas (see www.sshrc.ca).

Given the attention that is being paid to this activity in Britain and elsewhere, it is likely that we can expect to see some interesting initiatives in Canada in the coming years as we develop a more evidence-based approach to public policy.

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