

Where are the one-handed scientists?

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The sacking of the Government's chief drugs adviser Professor David Nutt is more evidence for concern on how it handles key research, argue leading academics Rebecca Boden and Debbie Epstein

WHEN New Labour was elected in 1997, Tony Blair proclaimed that “what matters is what works” and that his government would end ideologically-based decision-making in favour of public policy based on evidence.

Recent events bring this claim into doubt, suggesting that what the Government is actually interested in is, rather, “policy-based evidence”. That is, the only acceptable evidence is that which supports the policy choices already made.

US President Truman once lamented that there were no “one-handed scientists” sent to advise him. Our government appears determined to find them.

Two incidents in October illustrate this.

First, a review of primary education led by Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University suggested that government policy in England was fundamentally at odds with the evidence base. Alexander notes that the “the review drew on over 4,000 cited publications, 28 specially commissioned research surveys and the views and experience of the thousands of individuals and organisations who through written submissions, emails and face-to-face meetings gave evidence to the Cambridge Primary Review”.

Despite this, within hours of receiving this extensive and rigorous report, Vernon Coaker, the Westminster schools minister, rejected the review outright. His response misrepresented the review, attributing to it views it did not express, and casting it as “out of date”, on account of the three years' careful work that producing it had taken.

Second, the Home Secretary sacked Professor David Nutt as chairman of the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) for criticising the Government's drugs policy.

The committee's evidence-based recommendations have, since the 1970s, been translated directly into policy. But, since Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, its unchallenged evidence over the categorisations of cannabis and ecstasy has been rejected out of hand. Many eminent scientists have lined up to support Professor Nutt, including the past and present Chief Scientific Advisers to the Government (Professors David King and John Beddington) and other science luminaries such as Lord Robert Winston.

The UK Government's propensity to ignore evidence that doesn't suit chosen policy is not new. In 2000, David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education, complained to the British Educational Research Association that the tendency of educational researchers to produce evidence that did not suit government policy was “perverse” and “ideologically driven”.

In reality, policy probably never is and never was entirely evidence-based.

The evidence-based policy making approach implies only that policy-making should be based on evidence, not entirely determined by it – politicians will always have political considerations to bring to bear in making their final choices.

Given this, in a democracy politicians must have the courage and skill to defend their politics-based policy choices which may run counter to the evidence base. At the same time, academic experts must have the freedom to state publicly what the evidence base is.

These recent events suggest that there is pressure being placed on, and the criticism being made of, those experts who choose to publicly state what the evidence is when it is at odds with politicians' policy choices. This could lead to the dangerous situation of politicians stating that policy is evidence-based when, in fact, the experts have been effectively silenced.

It might also induce some experts to keep the peace by producing policy-based evidence.

This is worrying for two reasons. First, in the absence of a proper evidential base policy is likely to be poorly formulated, made 'on the hoof' and constantly changing in response to the vicissitudes of political expediency and panic. Hence, government can simultaneously express concern about young people's binge drinking in city centres, whilst refusing, in its drugs policy, to formally recognise the harm done by alcohol (one of Professor Nutt's arguments).

Second, and perhaps even more important in the long run, is the potentially destructive effect that government demands for evidence to support politically motivated policy choices might have on academic freedom. Academics are coming under increasing pressure to do "useful" research – but "useful" is defined by the same government that demands policy-based evidence. Moreover, there is increasing pressure for this "impact" to be near-instantaneous and demonstrable in advance.

All sensible academics have a desire that their publicly-funded work should benefit the society and/or the economy. They are not interested in advancing narrow political interests, but in making the world a better place in whatever way they can. The case of Professor Nutt and many others like him suggests that if government has its way then the innovative, imaginative and fundamentally beneficial work done by researchers in UK universities will be sidelined in favour of poor quality work designed to legitimise the incumbent government's political choices.

The irony of this is that the creation of this faux evidence base is done at the public's expense. In short, we will be paying through the nose for the pleasure of having the scientific wool pulled over our eyes.

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