
1 Introduction— why this roundtable?

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The Productivity Commission was created to help governments deal with the ‘hard’ policy issues — those that are complex or contentious or (frequently) both. It does this by conducting detailed research and encouraging debate and greater public awareness about the causes of policy problems and the tradeoffs in different policy options. This work is directly connected to, but operates at arm’s length from, government. And it is motivated, under the Commission’s statute, by what is in the best interests of the community as a whole.

As many of you will appreciate, the Commission’s remit has expanded greatly over the years, from a primary concern with assistance to industry, to issues with wider economic, social or environmental dimensions. On the social policy front, major studies have been conducted recently in relation to gambling, paid parental leave, aged care, disability support and the not-for-profit sector. All of these produced recommendations that the Commission judged would enhance the wellbeing of those directly affected as well as the wider community.

A key strand of the Commission’s work is the secretariat support it provides for the Review of Government Services under COAG. This has involved performance monitoring rather than policy evaluation and advice. But it has brought to light considerable variations in policy performance across our federation, in relation to the efficiency and effectiveness, including equity, of government programs of human services. It is thus an important tool for identifying potential for policy improvements.

Perhaps the biggest eye-opener for us has come through our secretariat work for COAG developing and populating a framework of outcome indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. As my colleague Robert Fitzgerald will shortly explain, this body of work indicates that despite several decades of good policy intentions and effort, there remain considerable disparities between outcomes for Indigenous and other Australians — in areas where this is simply unacceptable, particularly for the twelfth largest economy in the world.

¹ Chairman, Productivity Commission (1998–2012).

Heeding lessons from New Zealand, where a similar ‘Closing the Gap’ report acquired the reputation of being little more than a ‘misery index’, the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report has sought, within a strategic framework, to highlight progress in outcomes as well as ‘things that work’ among existing policy initiatives and programs. The latter has proven challenging, to say the least; not necessarily because there are few things that *are* ‘working’, but because in most cases the information available to substantiate their effects is lacking.

This reflects policy development failings broader than the Indigenous area, as Deborah Cobb-Clark and Les Malezer will make clear later today, and to some extent the deficiencies are understandable. Social policy is notoriously difficult to design and evaluate, and Indigenous policy is as difficult as any. But that should be a reason for making more effort, not less. And if there is inherently greater uncertainty ‘up front’ about whether a policy’s outcomes will accord with its objectives, this places even greater importance on ensuring that arrangements are in place for their monitoring and evaluation.

Until recently, however, evidence and evaluation have played only limited roles in Indigenous policy in Australia. The focus has tended to be on intuitive notions of doing good or avoiding harms — on the ends, rather than detailed analysis and review of alternative means. And while there have been some successes, there is general agreement that, on the whole, government policies have fallen short. Indeed, in some cases they have made matters considerably worse, as Fred Chaney, who has a long personal history in Indigenous affairs, will relate.

It is said that ‘the greatest tragedy of failure is failing to learn from it’. But that seems to be the predominant history of Indigenous policies and programs. The recent review of Commonwealth Indigenous programs by the Department of Finance and Deregulation found a lack of robust evidence on the performance and effectiveness of most of them.

There is now broad acceptance of the idea that evaluation can and should inform the development of policies, and the design and implementation of programs. As Jody Broun, Co-chair of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, will discuss at dinner tonight, evaluation also plays a crucial role in holding governments to account.

There is some progress on the evaluation front. This roundtable includes presentations on several positive developments. For example:

- David Kalisch will talk about the COAG-commissioned Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, which aims to assemble and communicate the lessons from evaluations.

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- John Taylor in the same session will talk about the challenges associated with the renewed focus on collecting useful and valid data to inform evaluations.
 - Matthew James will discuss aspects of the design of evaluation strategies.

There is also the opportunity to learn from international experiences. Helen Moewaka Barnes (New Zealand) and Frances Abele (Canada) will discuss approaches to evaluation of Indigenous policies and programs in their countries, where there are some features in common with Australia.

There is of course more to good policy than good evaluations. How can evaluations not only be more systematically employed, but also be made more visible and influential? Two people with long experience in policy design and implementation — Michael Dillon (whose paper will be presented by Matthew James) and Brian Gleeson — will draw on the recent experience in the Northern Territory to discuss strategies for embedding evaluations into Indigenous policy development, with contributions from a panel drawn from the other speakers.

Our aspiration for this roundtable is that, drawing on the presentations from speakers and discussions around the table (for which we have assigned ample time), we can identify principles and practices to guide the better use of evaluation in Indigenous policy in the future — so that more quality evaluations will be undertaken, and the evidence gained from them will drive policy improvements that benefit Indigenous people and the wider community.