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# General discussion

Following Jonathan Pincus's reflections on the first four sessions (chapter 14), the Roundtable concluded with comments from a panel made up of David Tune, Ron Haskins, Jeffrey Smith and Mary Ann O'Loughlin, and then a general discussion involving other participants.

## Panel discussion

**David Tune** suggested the subject matter of the Roundtable would be valuable to both policy advisers and the politicians that they served. He noted that in long experience as a policy adviser, he had learnt there were often conflicting objectives in policy making (for example between excellence in design of a spending program, and fiscal cost).

A good policy idea could be proposed 5 or 6 times over 15 years, without ever gaining support, and then be accepted and implemented because various political and other forces had moved into alignment. One possible example was the reform of COAG arrangements, where there was a widening realisation among politicians and public servants at all tiers of government that existing processes weren't working well, and that continued strong economic performance would require redoubled reform efforts. Similarly, crises could also facilitate initiatives that couldn't otherwise have been undertaken.

Evidence could be influential when such opportunities arose, and public servants should try to anticipate the evidence requirements that would facilitate policy change. While this could be difficult, one successful example was precautionary thinking within the Commonwealth Treasury some 4 or 5 years earlier, about how governments should respond when faced with the threat of another recession. That exploration of the evidence had paid dividends in advice permitting a speedy response to the global financial crisis.

Finally, David Tune suggested that emphasis on evaluation may have faded over the last decade. Policy proposals used to require inclusion of an evaluation strategy, and funding was allocated for approved evaluation plans. But the quality of execution had sometimes fallen short, and it was desirable to build a stronger evaluation culture.

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**Ron Haskins** noted that while the use of evidence in the political process was often ‘ugly’, there were avenues of influence that could be used to strengthen evidence-based thinking: individual evidence-minded legislators; transparency institutions such as the Congressional Budget Office in the USA and the Productivity Commission in Australia; journalists with an interest in good use of evidence; and (in the US context) Congressional Hearings.

Making good policy was a medium-term commitment: most major US reforms had been built over 4 to 8 years, and ‘the truth will out in the long run’, even if poorly-informed thinking held sway at particular stages of the debate.

US experience that had been useful in strengthening the quality, quantity and influence of evidence included shaping reform legislation that included a budget for high quality evaluation, using random assignment where appropriate, and charging the relevant cabinet secretary with responsibility for using that funding most effectively.

**Jeffrey Smith** cited claims from some Australian colleagues who thought Australia would stand towards the bottom of a league table of advanced economies in its use of evidence to inform policy. But reflecting on some of the creditable Australian examples presented at the roundtable, he doubted that assessment would be true. He was, however, less optimistic than Ron Haskins about the beneficial impact of quality reporting in advancing the cause of evidence-based policy. In the US, he found even specialist journalists in quality publications generally made a poor job of explaining how a particular body of evidence had been established, and what its strengths and limitations were.

A key issue in strengthening evidence was the training and employment of numerate and methodologically-skilled evaluators. The US experience was that anti-poverty programs since the 1960s had seen the gradual emergence and dominance of economists over previous generations of sociological researchers in this field, strengthening evaluation. But a professional monoculture was not desirable, and Professor Smith praised the work of the US Institute for Education Sciences, that had transformed the quality of education policy evaluation, including by providing doctoral training grants for students who studied rigorous evaluation of education policies – with the key being the methodological rigour of the study.

Professor Smith also outlined the case for ‘routinization’ of evaluation in a particular area (such as labour market programs, or agricultural programs). Routinization sought to standardize the processes of relevant evaluations, in effect to a template that could be applied to many projects by less skilled evaluators. This would hopefully produce acceptable quality evaluations in a greater range of cases

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than could have been studied from first principles by a very limited pool of highly skilled evaluators.

**Mary Ann O’Loughlin** highlighted what for her were the most important messages from the Roundtable discussion: good evidence matters; good use of evidence has to be alert to differential impacts of policies on different groups, not just the average impact; randomised evaluation methodologies could be powerful, but were not a cure-all; and that the lags between gaining and analysing evidence, and its influencing a constituency for reform, were large.

On this last point, transparency and communication were important parts of the task. For policy makers and advisers to make sense of a large variety of rapidly-growing evidence, there were important roles for networks of experts, and for dissemination and processing institutions such as the Cochrane Collaboration.

## **General discussion**

In brief closing discussion, speakers with policy experience in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and the Commonwealth all argued it was an opportune time to carry forward innovations to support stronger evaluation and better use of evidence in policy formation.

Data sets (for example on health and education) that had previously been closely held within jurisdictions were now beginning to become more widely available, and there was scope for facilitating access to data and protocols for data sharing that could perhaps be helped by agencies such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the CoAG Reform Council, or the Productivity Commission.

Speakers felt the Roundtable had highlighted some ideas that were ripe for practical application in Australia, and some from other countries that might be useful, such as the roles of the Economic and Social Research Council, the Government Social Research Service, and the Chief Government Social Researcher in the UK. Professor Brian Head noted the opportunity to draw on such ideas in development of the Australian Research Council’s work.

One speaker observed that while there were obviously opportunities for government departments to do better evaluations, there would always be conflicting pressures on such departments, and there were virtues in transparency and independence in sponsoring greater evaluative contributions from institutions outside the public service.