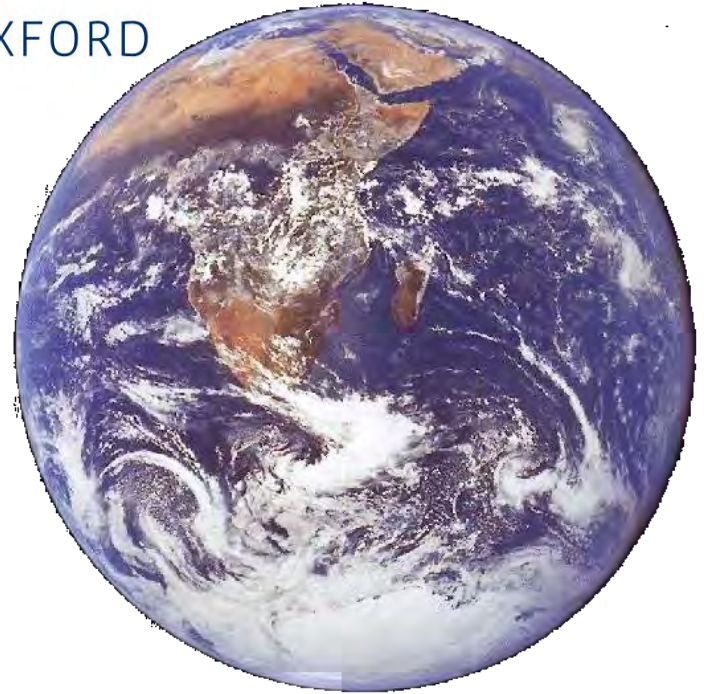




GREEN TEMPLETON COLLEGE | OXFORD

A Celebration of Statistics - an international perspective



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Importance of statistics in the development and analysis of social policy

- The collection, analysis and interpretation of data is essential in order to shape social policy through
 - understanding society today
 - and gauging the way society is changing
 - defining social issues
 - from the perspective of the members of society not just experts
 - identifying policy options
 - making choices of action
 - delivering policies and programmes
 - monitoring their impact and outcomes.



Concerned about over-emphasis on statistics for performance indicators rather than for understanding

“The need to sell the idea that performance is improving has overshadowed the need to actually improve performance.”

Report of New South Wales Government, Australia
Reference too the Francis Report on a failing hospital



Statistics fundamental for decision making

- Helping people to make well-informed decisions by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation
- Enlightening by making explicit what is known through scientific evidence and - importantly - what is not known
- Empowering people; enabling them to call governments, public servants etc to account – part of the democratic system, providing a window on society



All evidence is imperfect...

“The absence of excellent evidence does not make evidence-based decision making impossible: what is required is the best evidence available not the best evidence possible”

Sir Muir Gray 1997



The value of statistics to society must not just be asserted; it must be demonstrated

“Were a balance sheet for official statistics to be prepared, the costs would be clear enough. The benefit, or value, would however be found to be much more diffuse and harder to treat in traditional accounting terms. Given this, it is possible that the vital asset that official statistics represent is undervalued in public sector planning processes. And we observe that little systematic consideration is given to how the public value could be maximised”.

UK Statistics Commission:
The Use Made of Official Statistics, 2007



Contemporary Social Evils

Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2009

- Poverty and finance
- Immigration and prejudice
- Gender inequality
- Religion and society
- Space and security
- Drugs and alcohol use
- Fear of crime
- The future of education
- Aging and generational transfers
- Risk understanding and aversion
- Apathy and the democratic deficit
- Changing values



Making the case for the social sciences - UK Academy of the Social Sciences

<https://www.acss.org.uk/>

12: Education

11: Dementia

10: Wales

9: Mental Wellbeing

8: Longitudinal Studies

7: Scotland

6: Management

5: Sport and Leisure

4: Crime

3: Sustainability, the Environment and Climate Change

2: Ageing

1: Wellbeing



The relationship between statistical research and policy

- Many models of this relationship.
- I would argue for the **enlightenment** model
 - This portrays research as standing a little distant from the hothouse of immediate policy concerns.
 - Rather than research serving policy agendas in a direct fashion, the benefits are indirect.
 - Research is often addressed not directly to the decision problem itself, but to the context within which that decision will be taken, providing a frame for thinking about it.

Not always easy to persuade Governments to adopt this model – they may prefer a more instrumental use of research



My preference is for the enlightenment model...

- much of the **best** social research is inspired by an urge to understand, illuminate and explain, rather than by a compulsion to provide immediate policy solutions.
- the idea that research can be problem-solving is based on a misconception of the nature of the policy process, which is rarely characterised by rational decisions made on the basis of the best information. Indeed, information may be complicating and inconvenient, obscuring the clarity of choices most easily made under conditions of relative ignorance.



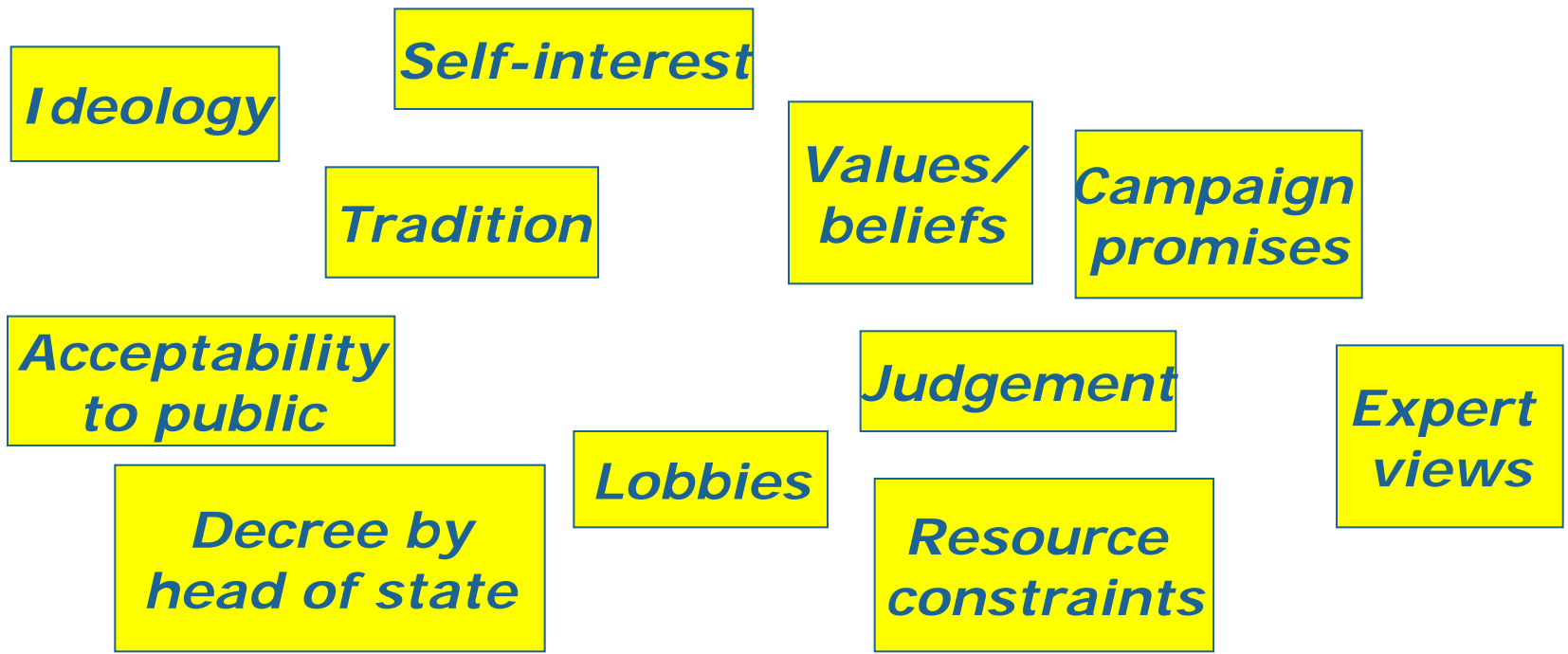
Evidence-based policy in contrast to opinion-based policy....

- which relies heavily on
 - either the selective use of information
 - or on the untested views of individuals or groups often inspired by ideological standpoints, prejudices or speculative conjecture
- **and policy-based evidence!**



The policy making process

- *Policy making is the **messy** process by which governments translate their political vision into programmes and actions to deliver desired changes in the real world*
- Evidence is but one input into the policy process



“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.”

John Maynard Keynes



The realities of the policy process

- Goals are ambiguous and the means of achieving them is uncertain.
- Decisions are less about projected consequences and more about process and legitimation.
- Information is never conclusive but reflects the indeterminacy of cause and effect relationships; it is infused with values.
- The policy process is characterised by competition over agenda setting, over jurisdictions, and over interpretations.



so ideally ...

- Data must be driven by policy needs.
- Data should be policy relevant but politically independent.
- Achieving an appropriate balance between relevance and independence is not straightforward especially in situations of resource constraints.
- The need to prioritise brings challenges.





Combat HiPPOs

The Highest Paid Person's Opinion
– is often wrong!

“It is a capital mistake to theorise before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgement.”

Sherlock Holmes

Not only HiPPOs who may misunderstand data but the public also have misconceptions

Examples

- Crime Data
- Teenage Pregnancy
- Immigration

Public Perceptions

- Ipsos MORI



TRUST by Anthony Seldon

- *“Trust is necessary for good government. A government which is trusted has higher levels of legitimacy, and there is a greater willingness of its citizens to comply with its rulings.”*
- *“A government that does not trust the public hems it in with mechanisms of accountability and surveillance.”*



To be valuable, statistical information must be both trusted and trustworthy

- Otherwise there will be fights about the data rather than about the issues
- Unless we collect data in an environment of mutual trust we will have poor quality results (due to non-participation, deliberate misrepresentation etc)
- A critical aspect is the trust in the Statistical Office



The willingness of Governments to acknowledge **inconvenient truths** is also a feature of trust in society

- Some Governments prefer good news stories and are too focussed on populism
- There may be international incentives (eg aid decisions) for Governments to show a particular picture of their performance
- Bad news stories may be delayed or buried
- Risks are manipulation of official statistics – or the perceived manipulation



WHY Quantify?

- Generalisability – over time and space
- Replicability
- Comparison
- Credibility
- Visibility



We need to guard against “what can’t be measured isn’t real”

The danger with a measurement culture is that excessive attention is given to what can be easily measured, at the expense of what is difficult or impossible to measure quantitatively even though this may be fundamental.



Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi report

- Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress
- <http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/en/index.htm>
- Concerns about
 - the adequacy of current measures of economic performance, in particular those based on GDP figures
 - the relevance of these figures as measures of societal well-being, as well as measures of economic, environmental, and social sustainability
 - the over-emphasis on economic growth



Move from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals

- Concern about an unrelenting pursuit of growth
- At the expense of the environment
- Recognition that it behoves us to give visibility to the disenfranchised in our societies
- And to have greater local ownership
- **Concern too about inequalities within our societies**



‘A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members’

Mahatma Ghandi

“The Spirit Level”

Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009



Why do we collect global data?

- For reasons of accountability
 - of national governments
 - of aid agencies
 - of international agencies
- For advocacy and resource mobilisation
- For comparative purposes
 - ‘understanding of oneself is gained through knowledge of another’



Understand incentives

- Governments are both monitoring the public services, and being monitored, by the global data.
- Many of the data are expressed as targets.
- And some of the international agencies use the data for naming and shaming – or for league tables of performance.
- <http://www.rss.org.uk/Images/PDF/publications/rss-reports-performance-monitoring-public-services-2003.pdf>



Goodhart's Law

When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.

David Boyle's *The Tyranny of Numbers*

Paradox:

- If we don't count something it gets ignored
- If we do count it, it gets perverted



Increasing use of administrative data

- Anonymised tax records
- Patient records
- Student registration data
- Unemployment registers

Linkage of data from different sources allows new questions to be addressed

eg combination of behaviour and attitude information

Can counter some of the response issues by reducing response burden

Can be less expensive

Be careful not to disenfranchise the research users



Research can serve the public good when it seeks to enlighten and inform in the interests of generating a wider public debate.

The appropriate aim is not **evidence-based policy**, but a **broader evidence-informed society**.

A broad agenda of official statistics which are trusted and trustworthy is essential to achieve this, so is a user community who have strong statistical literacy skills.



“The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life.”

John F Kennedy - in his inaugural address a half-century ago



Thank you for
your invitation and attention

