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## **Governing Well**

### Challenges of achieving evidence based Cabinet decisions

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## **Governing well**

- I will talk about the process of government and the challenges and opportunities for evidence based decision making. Key themes will be:
    - ❖ The necessity to keep adapting and learning from experience
    - ❖ The importance of evidence over anecdotes
    - ❖ The need to continually revisit issues as the political, social and economic environment constantly evolves and changes
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## What is evidence based policy?

- At the core of government is decision making
- Good decisions are usually well informed and follow critical discussion
- There will be different kinds of evidence used to justify arguments
- Finance ministries focus on efficiency
- Spending ministries emphasize outcomes
- Weighing the balance!!

## The importance of evidence (1)

- Nelson Mandela in 1996, the census must go ahead
- Governments must avoid the Ostrich syndrome
- The reality of ceaseless change and global mobility, more complex economies and societies make research, investigation necessary
- It is vital to have good primary data often collected across countries and allowing broad comparisons
- Measuring economic progress is important as is a focus on key social domains such as health and education to assess social progress
- Regional/spatial/cultural differences matter

## **The importance of evidence (2)**

- Interpretation of evidence often difficult and contested
- Universities and research institutes play an increasingly important role in modern government
- An example is the African Union's commitment to building a pan African information base and encouraging the sharing of information across countries

## **The importance of evidence (3)**

- Researchers provide information and suggest different ways to think about a problem
- May be less useful when it comes to addressing the issues in terms of the practical policy options
- A key issue is the way researchers interact with government
- Important that there is interaction and mutual learning
- The academic researcher may not understand the policy process, or the complexities of government
- On the other hand, grounded research can make for good policy

## ***How Cabinet makes evidence based decisions***

### **Cabinet focus is important**

- ❑ Giving the most time to the more important issues
- ❑ Providing space for exhaustive discussions
- ❑ Getting Cabinet interested in the problem and not only possible solutions
- ❑ It is usually the more complex issues that make the Cabinet agenda
- ❑ It is important to find ways of expanding Ministers understanding of the issue before making a final decision

## Cabinet processes

- The use of specialist standing committees
- Cabinet in Committee and resolving an issue in stages
- Bringing in outside experts to brief Cabinet
- The role of advisers in Cabinet or Cabinet Committees
- Giving thought to presentation of issues

***How a robust policy process supports evidence based decision-making***

## The policy process

- The contested nature of politics requires an ordered approach to making decisions as follows:
  - ❖ Identify issues, define and articulate problem
  - ❖ Policy analysis, collect information, clarify objectives and develop options proposals
  - ❖ Undertake consultations
  - ❖ Move to decision
  - ❖ Implement and evaluate

## Policy design (1)

- Governments are in the business of making important decisions, deciding between alternative courses of action but pressures affecting policy making include.....

## Policy design (2)

- ❖ Policy context and the focus on the next election
- ❖ Perceived public opinion
- ❖ Stakeholder opinion
- ❖ Politics and power
- ❖ Pragmatics ( e.g. available resources)
- ❖ Ideology, values, habits, traditions
- ❖ Media lobbying

## Policy design (3)

- Evidence based and influenced policy important in managing these pressures
- At the level of Cabinet, policy will need to pass various tests such as political and economic feasibility
- Ministers should convince Cabinet that the policy proposals are supported by evidence and will achieve the objective, e.g. reducing poverty within a given time span
- Cabinet officials should think about the way the proposed policy is presented, e.g. use of tables, charts

## Maximum feasible participation

- Consultation is an important part of developing evidence based policy
- To achieve change, you must bring people with you
- In anticipating policy reform, those most affected should be part of the decision making
- In Australia, former Prime Minister Bob Hawke successfully used **summits** to bring diverse interests into the policy process and achieve 'buy in' for difficult decisions

## The importance of an implementation strategy

- A rigorous government will not just agree to what sounds like a good idea
- Australian academic Hugh Stretton referred to "Simple ideas but complex programs"
- Cabinet needs to be convinced that the Minister has devised an implementation plan that will achieve the foreshadowed results, **and that the Minister's strategy will work**
- The policy may need to be introduced in stages with reporting back
- Too often the practicalities of implementation can undermine an otherwise valuable policy initiative



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***The value of a cooperative approach to achieving evidence based Cabinet decisions***

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**Breaking down the silos**

- Important to achieve cooperation of Ministers and ministries to investigate a policy problem and seek to understand it in a holistic way
  - A multi pronged strategy involves a number of ministries co-operating to develop a joint submission based on joint research and investigation
  - Important role of public sector leadership in achieving cooperation
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## **Building and sustaining a wider evidence base**

- The collation of primary data and statistics across jurisdictions is important in Federal systems of government and broader communities of interest such as Europe and Africa
- In Australia, there are challenges to developing broad-based evidence because the States may be reluctant to share data or even experience
- Drawing on diverse sources of evidence enables comparisons of what works and what doesn't, and creates incentives to achieve better practice

***How effective evaluation supports evidence based decision making***

## Evaluation (1)

- The research and monitoring task in modern government is ongoing and just as important as policy design
- Governments should insist on objective and independent evaluations of policies and programs
- Evaluation has become a critical tool in measuring policy effectiveness

## Evaluation (2)

- In the past evaluation was seen as a threat whereas it is increasingly a test of credibility
- In my experience, a positive evaluation of a program was critical to sustaining policy momentum with Finance and Treasury
- Also important in providing an evidential basis for Cabinet discussions where spending Ministers needed to convince line departments
- Source of important evidence for line departments given their critical role

## Benchmarking

- Another way of thinking about effective evaluation
- For example, Cabinet may decide to make an effort to increase participation of primary school age children in education
- Establishing milestones that will be progressively achieved provides a strong incentive to reach the goals set
- Also important to make transparent what governments are trying to achieve, thus helping to build support among the public
- Governments need to agree on what they will accept as realistically successful outcomes

## Achieving change is an ongoing process

- It is important for ministries to be learning communities that are building intellectual capital
- Private consultants are important but learning should not be lost and consultants support the developmental process in government as well as in communities
- The experience shared by people in government agencies needs to be recognized and valued

## Conclusion

- There will always be tension between policy and politics
- It is likely that it will be public servants who will recognize the importance of the overall process
- Shift in modern government to recognize need for a holistic approach to policy development
- Constant need to revisit issues