
Giving evidence a chance

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Let me start by acknowledging the successes you have had such as unrestricted access to therapies to treat Hepatitis C and progress in HIV testing and treatment. Despite success there are still significant concerns and challenges; and I refer here to rising rates of STI's, inequitable access to health services and social care for marginalised populations, and too much focus on "law and order" as policy options. Already this tells me something about your work and the ideas that motivate you. Hopefully too it tells me that you will appreciate the politics that were associated with the HIV and Hep C successes not only in the corridors of power but also at street level in the communities that mattered.

I hope I'm right but what I see here today is a type of "movement" - an evidence movement if you will - that wants more focus on the social, economic and environmental determinants of illness, that wants to take up the cause of the marginalised and vulnerable, and which is supportive of a harm reduction approach. You see individuals as well as categories, rights as well as responsibilities, mores and behaviours as well as laws and regulations and unintended consequences as well as intentions. You seek to understand how the world actually works as well as how it might work better. In all of the complexity and amongst all of the declared wars against this and that you see public health and harm reduction as important parts of this progressive equation.

Your motto I would suggest - give evidence a chance!

There was a time when evidence appeared to be winning the war against ignorance and bigotry - but can we say that today when science itself - and the scientists who carry its flag - are subject to populist critique?

Evidence has always had to battle against a range of forces be they ideologies, vested interests or opinion-poll populism. There was always a chance for success particularly if its recommendations were in line with a particular ideology, public opinion and a significant interest group in society. Those circumstances do emerge, but all too rarely.

Today the battlelines have hardened with the emergence of a particular strand of thinking deeply hostile to modern science and its approach to investigation and recommendation. It's a complete package and has been taken up by political movements of throughout the Western World.

It's not a "relaxed and comfortable" world in which we live, and what we call education faces popular criticism. There's increasing reliance on beliefs alone and distrust of knowledge, the view that doubt is some sort of right to question even that which proper processes have deemed to be credible, increasing prioritisation of feelings and impressions over reasoned argument and deliberation and, at the extreme, complacency about or hostility towards politics and the open and progressive society that require it. Put all four together and you have a radical but unthinking

populism - post-truth politics as The Economist has described it - the sources of which may to some extent be understandable but the consequences of which are certainly damnable - a more fearful and resentful world, restless rather than disciplined and reasonable. What we need is an educated person's response to these developments and that means policy-makers more attuned to the real world of the application of their theories, greater efforts to find new ways of engaging and involving in decision-making and an explicit commitment to a more equal society, not just in opportunities but also in outcomes. However, more than anything else we need those of us committed to giving evidence a chance to be more political, yes political!

In illustrating what I mean by this let me begin by telling a story about the former President of the USA, Lyndon B Johnson. It's about a meeting between the then President Lyndon Johnson and a delegation of feminists in the 1960s. They made their submission to the President and after he'd clarified a few points he said: "Well, you have convinced me that I should do it. Now go out and make me do it". They weren't happy with his response but Johnson, the master politician, understood the importance of public pressure when it came to changing the law. Martyrdom wasn't his cup of tea but the politics of the numbers was and he corralled the majorities that gave America its Civil Rights Act (1964) and its Voting Rights Act (1965). In a divided nation, he demonstrated not only strength of purpose for that which was right but also extraordinary political nous, the latter being the subject for my address today.

What, then, is this politics about which we need to be educated?

Politics is all about power and influence. Power is the ability to do things, for example to pass laws and fund programs. Influence is less direct but just as important. We can influence the ideas of those with power (or who are seeking to gain it). So too I should add can we take steps to influence the lifestyle and behaviour of people, a very complex but nevertheless necessary part of public policy and not just in the health arena.

There are, of course, many views on how politics should be organized and practised. From the public interest point of view there's a good way involving firstly various layers of accountability at the peak of which are regular, fair and free elections and secondly respect for the differences that are part and parcel of any society and which become the springboards for change and progress. However, we can't be too sanguine about what actually happens as opposed to what we hope is happening. Politicians and activists are continually exploring the outer limits of acceptability. Some play hardball and are always ready to dig up and spread dirt on opponents. They may cover up and cut corners. Some fake left while going right. Fear is often mobilised as a force drowning out reasoned consideration. Vested interests very rarely let the public interest into the door without a fight. This being said there's also constructive way to seek power and influence - showing an interest and seeking out support, being at the right place at the right time, building up your credibility and being strategic.

When it comes to politics whether we observe it at our workplaces or in government there are different types of players - the manoeuvrers expert in deception and with little regard for the sanctioned rules unless they help the cause, the street fighters who are masters of the cut and thrust, team players who will cut corners in the interests of their tribe and the purists for whom behind-the-scenes grappling for power and prestige is of no interest. Others may play politics, they don't. In relation to the purists I'm reminded of the comment of the great philosopher of politics Machiavelli: "A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must

necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good'. He knew what he was talking about having been tortured following the collapse of the republic he had served as a public official from 1498 to 1512. In his turbulent world being ineffective in the face of an enemy meant ostracism, punishment, torture or even worse. Being political at all times - and sometimes in an ugly way - was necessary to personal let alone political survival.

It's complex politics it's personally difficult to practice politics but it is important - remember blind faith, ambition and self-interest about which I spoke earlier, are in there all the time battling against science, self-restraint and altruism. It's not just the strength of an argument that guarantees victory in these contested spaces - it's political skills like self-awareness (and self-control in the face of challenge), being aware of the driving forces bringing about change in society, being able to read people and situations, building alignments and alliance and being able to listen and communicate at a range of levels, including in new and old media. Political astuteness as Professor Jean Hartley has pointed out, is "about working with contest and conflict to achieve organizational and social goals".

Ideally, then, what we need to see if evidence is to be given a real chance is that (1) governments are onside and fully briefed on the issues, (2) there is an alliance of interests willing to give support and, in the case of some willing to be involved in the implementation, and (3) public opinion is firmly onside. Remember we saw this at play when these factors at play when it came to tackling the HIV-Aids crisis. We should learn from that success.

The truth is, of course, that such unity of purpose and strength of collective commitment doesn't come easy. Indeed, the practitioners of evidence are just as prone to division and rigidity as those working in the world of high politics.

Advocates of change aren't immune from the temptations of politics such as exaggerating findings, cutting corners for short-term gain and worst of all concealing embarrassing findings. Also, there are the "faction wars" and "personality conflicts" that can break out between the activists and the politicians, and between the purists and the rest over strategy or tactics. So too can we often recognise those who are "too smart by half", "too proud to compromise" and "too factional to listen". Politics requires a high degree of focussed behaviour and the discipline to back it up.

There's a danger too of rigidity in thinking about the right values mix, the right policies and the best way to do politics. There's never just one way and agility necessitates a mind open to alternatives, particularly when faced with continual defeat or stalled progress. Sometimes innovation is required in a research agenda, a policy program and, sometimes too, in strategy and tactics, including in a message and its communication.

Where, then, do values fit into all of this? A good starting point is the WHO definition of health.

"A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

It's a balanced mix of the positive and the negative but one that leaves us a little short of the starting-post. We still need to ask: Just what is meant by well-being and just what counts as disease? Some provide what I would call an idealistic or utopian answer to that question and a fundamentalist politics to back it up, others a more realistic answer

from which a pragmatic politics emerges. The utopians, whether left or right, want perfection and are willing to fight a war on its behalf whilst the realists are looking for the best that can be achieved in what is always a messy and complicated situation. They too have values but adopt a pluralistic perspective and that means working out how to bring together multiple objectives rather than assuming that if one value is achieved all the rest will fall into place. They are neither left nor right, neither radical nor conservative; sometimes favouring more intervention sometimes less, the key factor being what the circumstances dictate needs to be done to produce a better world.

I'm sure you would recognise these two positions in the work you do. What's actually at play are two sets of beliefs about human nature and human freedom and two ways to look upon the political and public policy projects. Each side brings its own facts to the table to support their political positions on the questions related to alcohol and drug, communicable diseases and so-called "welfare dependency".

Not surprisingly the findings of properly conducted scientific research favours the pragmatists. After all that is the aim of the exercise - to find out how things actually work as opposed to how we would hope they work. Indeed, so aspirational is the view of the drug-free advocates amongst us that they battle to cope with the facts about human desire and human weakness, just as the teetotallers and prohibitionists did with alcohol. They over-play their hand on fundamental beliefs, over-estimate the power of the will and under-estimate the negative consequences of prohibition. They are buoyed by the few personal transformations that occur but not fazed by the many that don't. In their view, there are enough facts to keep their hopes alive and justify the war in which they are engaged. For fundamentalists it's a war that justifies the use of all sorts of weapons most importantly the criminal law, which, as they say so often, is a beacon that makes clear to all what is expected of all.

The pragmatists on the other hand look into society now and in the past and see humans using drugs and alcohol sometimes in the search for pleasure and sometimes to avoid pain, sometimes habitually and sometimes infrequently. They assume that people don't always think clearly, that they take risks and that this is how things are, the use of the criminal law but not all laws and regulations being inappropriate and problematical from a rights and health perspective rather than a beacon of hope. The hope they have is for a world that is always improving not one that is perfect.

For their part, however, pragmatists often battle to cope with the existence of fundamentalists in their midst. The fundamentalists have been successful in appealing to understandable fears people have and are not reluctant to use whatever means it takes to mobilise public opinion. For those who have been carefully studying human nature in a social setting for many years this all too often successful approach to political campaigning can be very frustrating and can lead to the results uncovered by the Pew Research Centre in 2009 "that while Americans tend to have positive views of the scientific community, scientists tend to consider the public ignorant and the media irresponsible". The required response here of course would be not to throw in the towel but to develop and implement a political strategy. Consider the two ways a politician might approach an issue requiring a response - they may "decide, announce and defend" or they may

"engage, interact, cooperate". A researcher when on the public stage is trained to the former even though in the process of research he or she will rely heavily on engagement, interaction and cooperation to produce solid findings. What is needed is an engagement strategy relating to the marketing of the findings as well

- and not just late in the piece. As Chris Mooney has noted, there needs to be a regular public engaged by the scientific community on "potentially controversial subjects" and moreover, engagement "before truly fraught conflicts are allowed to emerge". He calls it a research and response infrastructure, good advice I believe for harm reductionists keen to advance their cause.

In all of this we need to be reminded that politics is first and foremost about campaigning and timing.

There are so many factors that determine success or failure in the political world but one stands out above all else - the effectiveness of a campaign. Indeed, it's not easy to identify significant political achievement without a campaign that's backed it up. Acknowledging this is not only important in itself but also for what it tells us about public opinion. How often is it that we see significant polling support for a proposition fall away when subject to the blow-torch of a well-organized and orchestrated campaign? The Australian Republican Movement learnt this lesson the hard way in 1999 when the referendum to change our constitution to a republican one failed. On the surface the polling looked good but it wasn't good enough to survive the brutal campaigning of the monarchists.

Campaigns take us from the science of public policy to the science of public opinion. Those who seek some change or another come face to face with their enemies and a struggle of ideas and images ensues. It can be ugly and almost always creates passions previously unseen. These passions then create temptations, particularly the temptation to cover up any cracks in an argument or to exaggerate the findings. When the case for change is being made on the basis of scientific research the credibility of the researcher is central to the case for change. Cutting corners or spinning the case beyond a reasonable interpretation of the findings isn't good politics. Indeed, in a campaign it won't escape scrutiny and becomes food for a media forever hungry for conflict.

One would hope that when such temptations present themselves the researcher now researcher/activist would resist. However, not so easy for those well versed in the research, conclude and defend way of thinking is the challenge of prioritisation and the necessity of unity. Sometimes we have to swallow toads without making a face as Carlos Feuntes pointed out! Look at many of the major breakthroughs in research based policy and they have carried their compromises or come at the expense of other highly valued objectives. There's no one perfect model of harm reduction for example and plenty of different ways the cause can be progressed, some smaller and some larger and structural, in nature. In a serious campaign, all of these differences and all of these possibilities would need to be sorted out and more specific objective arrived upon. Not all of what's been researched and though through would make the grade and that could mean bruised egos and frustrated ambitions.

A narrative around that objective would also need to follow and that too would need to prioritise in order to keep the message simple and marketable. A harm reduction campaign, for example, might as a matter of politics emphasize differing elements of the case - the individual rights/personal health elements or the community-wide safety/public health elements or indeed,

all of the above. These are choices political campaigners cannot avoid. There's also the question of whether an issue is framed in a conservative or a radical way, an issue we see playing out in the marriage equality debate.

This takes me to the question of timeliness. Are the "times" such as to require defence of existing achievements or the pursuit of new ones? Are you working in an area where there has been change, where the consultative processes have been exhausted and the hornet's nest calmed for the time being at least? On the other hand, you may be working in a time of crisis where new ways of thinking and acting are needed. It's in those situations you will need to be armed and ready not just with an argument but also a political strategy.

Being there for the long haul is as important a political asset as the short burst of activity and publicity. It means building relationships with the power holders that matter; earning their trust with the strength of your research and your recognition of the constraints they work under. Rarely do any significant changes in policy happen quickly and inevitably the hard grind of research, meetings, manoeuvrings, shifting alignments of support between stakeholders and unending attempts at persuasion will be needed. Only the survivors have the chance to be the victors.

Chris Mooney in his booklet *Do Scientists Understand the Public?* argues that to make all of this long-term collaborative work possible and to give it effectiveness requires collaboration between "research scientists, social scientists, public engagement experts, and trained and skilled communicators. The latter may or may not be scientists, but they should be ready to move, on a moment's notice, to address controversies and concerns. Meanwhile, in the absence of any pressing conflagration, public engagement initiatives could help sculpt a citizenry that will be less likely to distrust the scientific community, or reject its expertise, and more willing to understand the scientific perspective (so long as scientists approach the public openly and take citizens on their own terms".

For all of the political constraints placed in the way of good policy, it can be achieved. What history does tell us is that evidence-based change is possible even if the constraints are many. Australia's embrace of aspects of a harm reduction approach to alcohol and drugs is a good demonstration of that. Crises have helped, for example the AIDS crisis in the 1980's or the heroin crisis in the 1990's but still the argument needed to be had - and won in the corridors of power and the suburbs of public opinion. Politicians had to ward off vested interests on their own side as well as win the war that is public and parliamentary opinion. They did this to good effect.

One of the factors assisting politicians keen to make changes was the use of broadly representative summits to consider issues and make recommendation. I mention two - the Drug Summits in New South Wales in 1999 and in Western Australia in 2001. Out of the former came the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre and out of the latter cannabis law reform (now overturned by the Liberal Government I should add). These Summits gave confidence to the politicians who saw merit in reform and the confidence to push ahead despite the opposition of ideologically or interest-inspired opposition.

In respect of any future changes in law and practice it is likely that similar institutions will need to be created, perhaps even citizens' assemblies of randomly selected

citizens requested to examine an issue and make recommendations following properly facilitated deliberations. This was done on Sydney's lockout laws through a collaboration between the NSW Government, the City of Sydney and the New Democracy Foundation. A Mini-Public of 43 was randomly selected and asked the question: "How can we ensure we have a vibrant and safe Sydney nightlife?" After three months of deliberation they found value in the lockout law and supported it subject to an earlier review process than was intended and a "good behaviour exemption". Neither of these two recommendations were taken on board by the government. This being said I believe Juries or Assemblies of this sort are well placed to provide a considered view from the public as to the merits or otherwise of particular proposals derived from properly conducted research.

In our established system of representative democracy governments are accountable to the people first and foremost by way of elections. In between times activity continues from below as interest groups of all sorts press their case in a range of ways, some transparent some not so transparent. In deliberative democracy, an effort is made to use random sampling techniques to create mini-publics that replicate the population at large. These mini-publics are either elected politicians or self-selected activists - and this is their strength as deliberative bodies. The assemblies - or indeed juries - so created then consider the evidence presented to them by expert opinion and seek to find common ground amongst themselves as to what the public interest would say is the right way to go.

You could put it this way - our scientists provide us with the best that proper inquiry can find and our deliberative assemblies the best that our proper public consideration can produce by way of an application of those findings to human society. Take, for example, the current debate over whether or not to decriminalise drug use and possession as they have done in Portugal. There's plenty of scholarly evidence to say it would be the next best step forward for harm reduction. Like all evidence it's not as absolutely conclusive as an advocate might wish (that's how it always is in a world of imperfection and contradiction) but it does, at least as Professor Alison Ritter has pointed out, "provide users with a more humane and sensible response for their drug use".

What needs to be tested here are the two claims, one that it would be "more humane" and two that it would be "sensible". At the moment it's hard to see how these claims are going to be given a test beyond the halls of academia and conferences like this. They are - as we see - not on the agenda of the political class. What the political class see when looking in on the current research-driven debates in and around decriminalisation are divisions within the ranks of those seeking change on what the objective should be and an alliance between the powerful alcohol industry and drug-free advocates in which the latter lie low on alcohol use and abuse in exchange for the former playing their part in the War on Drugs. Add to all of that the stigma associated with illegality; it restricts users and other participation in campaigning as does the marginal and disadvantaged status of many who use.

Wouldn't it be important to know what a randomly selected group of citizens thought about this issue having been provided with all the arguments and evidence from the advocates and researchers?

Ireland recently used such an approach to consider aspects of its constitution, including that related to marriage. We should use it more often - it has the potential to assist those seeking a new approach to provide "democratic legitimacy" for their research findings. All too often today vested interests have an easy run and politicians are frightened away.

Let me conclude by asking you to reflect on the number of ideas and recommendations that will or could flow from this conference. Each and every one will not be without their drawbacks but when lined up as a whole they will surely show how we could improve our collective wellbeing and that of those in special need. After all that's why we come together at gatherings like this. Now ask yourself how many will actually get into the system for active consideration and how many will survive that process to become public policy? Some but not enough I suspect. That's not good, the work you do being too important to be left to the conferences and the journals. Make no mistake those who don't like the way you do things and many of the findings you make are embedded in the system and playing politics as hard as it gets. My conclusion - politics is your enemy only so far as you don't make it your friend.