



Evidence based policy

- “Evidence based policy” is orthodoxy. Calls for it are near universal.
- But is evidence always appropriate, and what constitutes it?
- There are many sources of evidence, and that for bushfires values, and legal processes may be more important than science in determining what constitutes evidence and what influences policy.

Some constraints

- Evidence is usually history, but policy is for the future.
- Is the past – for which there may be many interpretations - the best guide? [cf CC]
- Evidence is not perfect - we are not omniscient and do not and cannot have perfect knowledge – especially about the future.
- that knowledge is never complete or perfect, and is frequently ignored, discredited, distorted or subverted;

If we don't use “evidence” what should we use?

- Perhaps policy should be directed by other things, eg equity, justice, ideology? Use of evidence is about policy process rather than substance;

Whose evidence? What constitutes evidence? Who decides?

- Certain types of knowledge are privileged – science, law and authority. Trad knowledge & that acquired from practice is ignored. There are often large gaps between science and the experience of those dealing directly with the problem.

Evidence comes from science

- There is debate over what constitutes evidence in science ... IPCC uses only peer reviewed material... Cf govt research;
- Easy to discredit: "It's not science!"
- Much science is contested, and ideology, commerce, or values may be more important than "evidence";
- eg from fire such as the debate over prescribed burning – "many in the debate are confused"; community safety – have circumstances changed?

Law has the final say

- No-one has final say on what constitutes science or scientific evidence.
- Law is different. The process, acquisition and grades of evidence are set out in the Evidence Act (in NSW and C'wealth).
- Much is about dealing with uncertainty, and with conflict in evidence.
- Science & law both worry about false positives; both progress through argument. But law does not like second hand evidence, so the scientist must deliver the evidence directly;
- The Royal Commission also funds research to fill gaps.
- The enquiries have to make decisions and will do so with the best evidence they can get. Fraught but all tested in public;

Policy development

- Evidence has to suit the minister's "personality", officials have to support it ... and it has to survive numerous bureaucratic steps, media and PR people.
- The policy system may be more concerned with minimising legal and political risk than scientific purity.

Conclusions

- Evidence is often weakly lined with policy and decision making. Other values may be more important;
- Some post fire enquiries exhibit transparent and rigorous approaches to evidence, and explicitly address bias;
- Law and fire enquiries have to make decisions. Science has the luxury of asking for more research.
- Enquiry recommendations are often framed to leave room for political judgement. Unlike science, the RC is dealing to some extent with personal and professional bias.
- Post-fire enquiries generally use a legal approach to evidence, and this is often how science enters policy;

- Policy makers have to get on with their work rather than wait for certainty.