

Afternoon panel

William Solesbury's speaking notes

Understandable to be exercised about loss of jobs and contracts...But real concern must be about the influence and impact of social research on decisions

So let's try and be disinterested.....as matter of principle our ethos as researchers requires objectivity....and, as a matter of practice, we should recognise that many in power doubt our neutrality...

So, an age of austerity, yes ...difficult times for social research, yes....but let's not get carried away with ideas that we have hitherto been in a golden age when social research had great influence....the famous New Labour dictum 'What matters is what works' expressed a reductive view of what research could offer.... and anyway was not always heeded..... The nature of politics and decision making has not fundamentally changed.

Sandra Nutley's presentation introduced Carol Weiss's 4Is as influences on decisions – Information, Ideology, Interests and Institutions...I'd like to map them onto roles of three key players in policy and practice - deciders, advisers and influencers

- **Deciders** ie Chief Executives, programme managers, Ministers....their commitment to research varies enormously...(for every 'two brains' there will be a 'no brain' in these positions)....for them ideology (values, world views) is the main driver...especially in difficult times and especially following changes of power (new brooms sweeping clean)

- **Advisers** ie policy analysts, administrators, consultants...they are the prime sources of information...but for them experience probably counts as much as research...so any new insight we offer as researchers will be weighed against their professional and personal experience...and their thinking will be constrained by the culture, habits, routines and resources of their institutions..
- **Influencers** ie those outside organisations offering arguments to advisers and/or deciders...lobbies, think tanks, media, *eminence grises*, ....they may deploy evidence in their arguments but as interests they will also have axes to grind ..

So how best to work this system in difficult times?...I offer four maxims (or maybe maximisers, since they are designed to increase our influence)...

### **1. ACCUMULATE**

Individual pieces of research don't carry much weight against other influences....rather it is the accumulated stock of knowledge that we need to deploy more and more...here the standing advisers (eg Migration Advisory Committee, the Social Security Advisory Committee) or the appointed reviewers (eg Frank Field on poverty, Andrew Dilnot on social care) should be our conduits

### **2. FOCUS ON MEANS (AND OUTCOMES) MORE THAN ENDS**

Adage - 'Social researchers don't know better, but they do know more' ...Challenging the objective of policy is political act (and makes us objects of suspicions)...but presenting evidence that the means chosen will not work or that context has been misunderstood or outcomes are not as expected and why is helpful..

### **3. GO FORTH**

That is, break away from the dissemination model of impact (holding seminars, publishing reports) ...rather engage with deciders, advisers and influencers on their territory...for example, submit evidence to Select Committees or respond to consultations.

### **4 SEEK ALLIES**

Others, especially my Influencers (lobbies, think tanks, media), often have more status and better access than we researchers do...so forge alliances with them, provide the evidence that shapes their arguments...they offer a powerful, if indirect, path to advisers and deciders...