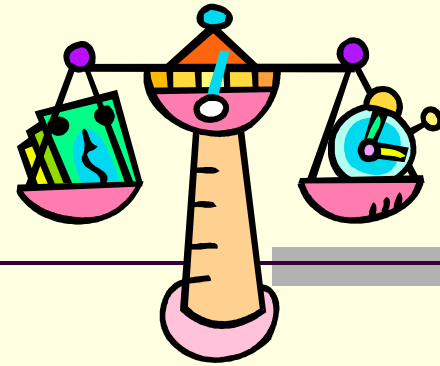**Australasian Evaluation Society Conference**

Perth 2008

The Political Context of Evaluation -

What does this mean for Independence and Objectivity?

The Premise

- Evaluation in a policy and political context
- Evaluation supports stakeholder involvement
- Naïve to suggest evaluation can operate in a political domain without being influenced by it
- Impact of political, policy and stakeholder influences can lead to compromises to concepts of 'Independence' and 'Objectivity'
- Is this commonly understood and how do we as evaluators respond to this challenge?
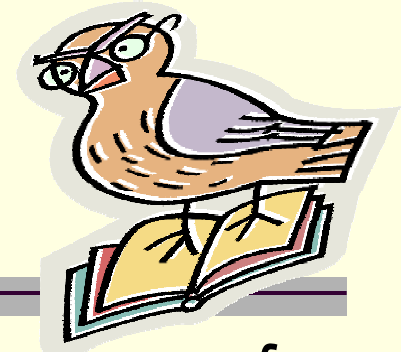
The Political Context

Evaluation is a:

- Political act as well as an investigatory process (Guba & Lincoln,1989)

- Process where evaluators are 'power players in a game where the rules are subject to manipulation….' (Patton, 1997)

- Process 'saturated with political concerns' (Berk & Rossi 1990)

- Socially constructed and politically articulated process (Taylor and Balloch 2006)

Challenge for Evaluation

To balance

the inevitable

influences

resulting from political and policy

considerations, together with interests
generated by active stakeholder

involvement, with the **credibility** of the
evaluation, particularly in relation to its findings

Credibility of Evaluations

'The success of the current boom in the use of evaluative information will remain largely dependent on its credibility….. Perceptions that evaluative information misrepresents reality (intentionally or not) are likely to render it useless—other than as a tactical weapon in political and bureaucratic skirmishes. There is some evidence suggesting the risk of a credibility crisis regarding much evaluative information' (Schwartz and Mayne 2005).

Credibility of Evaluations

It has been long warned that political and commercial pressures on evaluation clients and on evaluators lead to a priori bias in evaluation reports

(Chelimsky, 1987; Palumbo, 1987; Schwartz, 1998; Weiss,1973; Wildavsky, 1972)

Mao Tse-tung

Churchill

Lenin

Independence and Objectivity

- Credibility maintained through adoption of concepts of independence and objectivity
- Terms independence & objectivity often used interchangeably to depict process of adopting an autonomous & impartial position
- They are distinct but inextricably linked concepts

Independence

- Evaluator being awarded freedom to conduct the evaluation without undue control exerted by the commissioners of the evaluation, the organisation or program delivery personnel

Objectivity

- The evaluator's capacity to undertake un-biased and objective assessments and form conclusions during the evaluation

Independence & Objectivity

- Independence: freedom of the evaluator to pursue the rigour of the evaluation without compromise to imperatives and pressures from the political and organisational context, the commissioners or stakeholders

- Objectivity: impartiality exercised by the evaluator in their selection of evaluation methodology, approach to the conduct of the evaluation and the interpretation of findings

Challenge for Evaluation

Adopting a politically grounded, policy relevant & participatory approach to evaluation whilst also pursuing credible collection, analysis and reporting of evaluative data

Is Independence Possible?

- Relationship that exists between commissioner and evaluator - preserving a *commercial business relationship*

- "Insider" relationship of internal evaluator - preserving *position of employment & career*
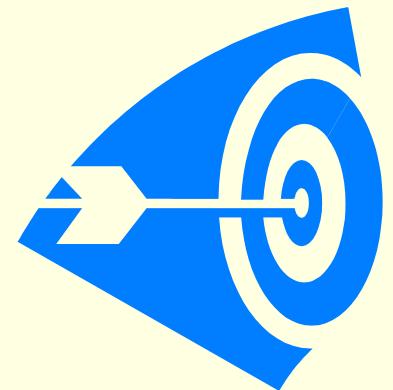
Is Objectivity Possible?

- Interpretations of data are subjective, arising from our personal position, values and orientation in life
- Same set of data can be interpreted in different ways depending upon the paradigm used to interpret it
- Patton (1997) replaces the notion of pure objectivity with fairness and balance
- Objectivity could include concepts of impartiality and accuracy

Objectivity as a Common Standard

- Evaluation findings and conclusions should be supported by the evidence gathered (data and analysis) and should be presented in an impartial (objective) manner

- Resisting pressure to produce findings consistent with those anticipated from the commissioning client with reference to political *agendas* & *imperatives*
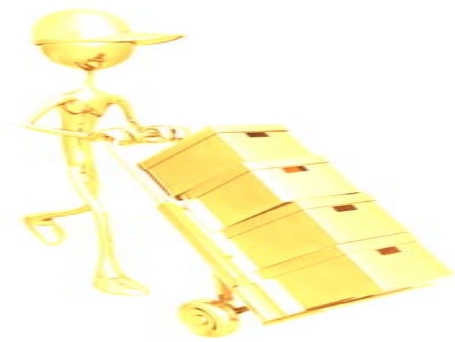
Case Study 1

- Evaluation commenced 12 months prior to completion of pilot period of funding
- Program found to be to be largely underperforming according to its stated goal and objectives
- State election announced and govt showcased 'successful' strategies on this particular social issue
- Evaluators pressured to reframe data, rephrase findings and re-word recommendations to provide a more positive evaluation than the data supported

Case Study 2

- During evaluation it became clear that the commissioning client had decided to cease funding - program staff given notice and midway during the evaluation program ceased to operate

- Findings were that program had been performing well and that it had developed a great level of support from the target communities

- Pressure placed on evaluators to adopt a more critical response to the program and identify greater areas of under-performance than data supported

Pressure Tactics

- Soft negotiation ('could you please reconsider/change the emphasis?')

- Medium level negotiation/persuasion ('I would like you to alter or remove the following sections/recommendations')

- Hard level persuasion ('Change or remove certain recommendations within the document… or else?).

Suggested Strategies

- Outline *requirements* for independence & objectivity specifying compliance with code of ethics/practice guidelines

- Discuss importance of preserving independence & objectivity for *credibility* of evaluation

- Establish

conflict resolution

processes

Long Term Strategies

- Opportunities for **education/awareness raising** as to what is involved in commissioning an evaluation.

- Ensuring all contracts offered specify that the contractor is to **abide by a code (s) of professional ethics, conduct or standards** such as that available through the Australasian Evaluation Society.

Question & Answer

- **Is evaluation really an independent and objective process or can it be bought for a price?**

- Answer is that currently evaluation is often used to achieve the latter purpose but we should strive as practitioners and commissioners of evaluation to ensure it is used for the former purpose.