

The Political Context

Vincent Cable – Does Evidence Matter? – ODI – 07 May 2003

Thank you for inviting me back here. I think it was three moves ago that I was last in the Overseas Development Institute, but it is nice to come back after almost thirty years. I was flattered to be described as a policy-maker. I cannot think when I actually made policy. I am a politician, which is not the same thing. This is an interesting subject, which made me think more than you normally have to when speaking. I realised that to an extraordinary degree, even in the political world, we pay lip-service to the evidence and research. I have two researchers working for me, one as Shadow Trade and Industry Secretary and one for general purposes. We have the House of Commons library that we all use and this is one of the best libraries in the country. So in a sense our lives are embodied in information and research. I thought rather than emphasise the difference between the research world and the political world, it might be more illuminating to think in terms of continuity. I have an analogy from the oil industry where I worked before I became a Member of Parliament. In the oil industry you have a progression from the upstream where you get the oil out of the ground to the refineries to the pumps to the consumers. Essentially what happens in relation to this subject is that you have to extract data, which someone then processes (this is probably what researchers are doing). It then gets passed downstream and people like me are at the downstream end of the business. We take the research and the data and we buy it and sell it. So in a sense we are part of the same industry but we deal with the product in a different way.

This is a politicians trick, but I thought that one way of differentiating between the way that someone like me operates and the way that researchers operate is in terms of a series of 's's which seem to summarise the political world quite well: speed, superficiality, spin, secrecy and scientific ignorance. I take examples will take examples of each of those.

In terms of speed, one of the differences between the two worlds is that, in the world I am in now, a lot of decisions have to be made very fast. I am an opposition spokesman not a Minister, but typically you will get a pager at half past eight in the morning: something has been on the today programme, like a steel works closing down or a strike somewhere and you have to get on the airwaves, get out a press release and give a comment about the subject, about which you know very little. You know broadly what your line is, but you have very little evidence, very little information and you have to improvise. And once you have a line you have to stick with it.

Speed compromises a lot of what you have to do and a lot of political life is like that. Some of the worst bits of decision-making that I have seen in my six years as an MP have been due to speed. I think the worst case of all was the Foot and Mouth epidemic. Everything happens very fast: it is in the run-up to a General Election, there is a lot of evidence out there, people have done studies about vaccination versus mass culling, but there just is not the time. It is about who gets to the Prime Minister's ear first and how you respond to tomorrow's headlines. As a result some awful decisions were made and it cost billions of pounds. Another example was the panic around the oil blockade. In my party, when we were in government, we all panicked. We had worked out for years what a sensible approach to oil pricing was and the idea of the price escalator. All the parties had a consensus that this was environmentally sound, we had had conferences and endless reports and we thought we knew what we were doing. And then the blockade happened and everyone simultaneously panicked and abandoned their policy positions. So an awful lot of political life is about how you respond with speed to rapidly changing events and often evidence is completely forgotten.

Secondly, superficiality. One of the sayings which has most applicability to my current life is that in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. We cover a lot of turf. I am not exceptional, but I am supposed to cover all Patricia Hewitt's department, the Department for Trade and Industry, as her opposite number, but I have also been given financial services, which includes everything to do with the City, as well as being on the Chancellor's Euro preparations group, plus a lot of constituency work. So inevitably you are dealing with things at a very superficial level. You are very dependent on the last person you talked to, or the person who gets to you with advice. At the risk of offending people here, there is one aspect of the trade and development work which worries me - precisely because of this problem that the one-eyed man is king - and that aspect is who the one-eyed man

is. In a very complicated area like trade and development, we as political consumers are very dependent on the competence and integrity of people in the NGO and think-tank community.

So within an issue like trade policy which is extremely complicated, there are probably only a few people in Parliament who have a clue about things like how the World Trade Organisation functions and the precise terms of the services agreement. You are very dependent on the people who come to you with what seems to be research and what seems like technical information. I have run into a certain amount of conflict with bodies like Oxfam and Christian Aid, who are very effective at presenting what looks like extremely professional, well-researched data which seems to prove that trade is bad for poor countries and bad for poor people in these countries. I do not know a great deal about the subjects that they deal with, but I know enough about trade policy to have doubts in my mind when I read this stuff. But my colleagues come to me with it and say that they have had a deputation, including the local vicar and all the party members and have been given this report from Oxfam's public affairs department and it must be right! They ask 'why are you being awkward and asking questions? Surely we should just sign'.

I think there is a worry here about the research community, that in between groups like the Overseas Development Institute and the Institute for Development Studies and us, there is now a quite dense network of non-governmental and campaigning organisations, much of whose work is excellent proselytising and professional work, but who have acquired a status in filling in the gaps in our lack of knowledge. They have been very influential in areas like this and often, I think, steering us in horribly wrong directions.

My third 's' is spin. It is often used pejoratively but the point here is essentially that in the political world, perception is often more important than reality. What people feel is often more important than the substance. I chair the all-party police group and this provides a classic example. Anyone involved in police work will know that using beat police is a pretty inefficient way of using police resources, but you cannot tell people that on the doorstep. There is massive public demand for more police on the beat and the police have now accepted that and the fact that public perception is more important than evidence-based allocation of resources. That is political reality. This is a very pervasive fact of life which does not just apply to politics.

Another example, perhaps a bit closer to the bone, is that when I was in Shell, one of the issues that I was trying to communicate as Chief Economist to the Managing Directors was that developing countries were, in the long-term (over a twenty or thirty year time horizon), potentially very important to the business. A lot of them were very sceptical. Their minds were focused on Europe and the US and 'out there' was a very threatening and dangerous place. This was not true of everyone, but there was this very conservative way of looking at things. I hit on a pedagogic device which solved this problem. It was to take a different way of presenting Gross Domestic Product (GDP) statistics. If you just take the classic GDP numbers it tends to show, for example, that China has a smaller economy than Belgium, but if you take the Purchasing Power Parity GDP numbers, it shows that China has the second biggest economy in the world. It is the same set of facts, the same evidence, but interpreted in a radically different way. So what I did is take all our GDP numbers converted into a Purchasing Power Parity base and present our projections and our analysis of the world in these terms. It was a startling reappraisal of the way the world actually was. You did not need to preach that the emerging world was important, the evidence was there. But what I was essentially doing was 'spinning' data in a different way. So spinning is part of political life and also part of business life and part of communication.

My fourth 's' is secrecy. One of the problems of government in general is secrecy. Certainly in the United Kingdom there are key areas where secrecy is everything. I hardly need to go on at great length about the war in Iraq, but there was an attempt not to argue the merits of the war in emotional terms but to do it in terms of evidence. The Blair memorandum on weapons of mass destruction was based on evidence. But it was evidence that was very heavily coloured by availability of data through the security services. So what is evidence, what is true and what is reliable?

My final 's' is scientific ignorance. One of the things that strikes you in the political world is that often there is very little relationship between the way we deal with, for example, risk and what scientific evidence (epidemiological studies and so on) would suggest was the real risk. One example was the panic over the MMR vaccine, where the political world is dealing with a set of assumptions about risk which are totally at odds with the scientific data. Another is the panic about rail safety. The whole rail network has enormous investment obligations imposed upon it in order to reduce accidents to zero, such that the risk involved in travelling on the railways is a hundred times less than it is in going on a road. But there is no mechanism for getting people to assess risk objectively between one mode of transport and another. Nuclear power is another case. I am not an advocate of nuclear power (one of the things I have been campaigning about is the bail-out on British energy), but looked at objectively in terms of risk, all the scientific evidence suggests that the risk of environmental damage, let alone death from a nuclear plant is massively lower than the public perception of that risk.

So scientific ignorance plays a major part in decisions. Scientific evidence leading to objective assessment of risk is something that is very often absent. One of the underlying reasons is a growing suspicion of science and scientists, who often respond in the worst possible way. For example, a big political issue if you are a constituency MP is telecommunications masts. People are scared about the cancer risks from these mobile phone masts and as an MP who wants to get re-elected, I have to say that I mercilessly exploit this. I organise petitions and all kinds of things. The fact is that the Chief Medical Officer, Sir William Stuart, did a very good scientific analysis of this a few years ago which looked at all the evidence and concluded that absolutely no evidence had been found to connect this phenomenon with health. Then, because of the way that scientists have been scarred by their own experiences of things like BSE, he left himself an escape route by saying that although he could not find any evidence of any health risk, he would advise policy-makers to apply a cautionary approach, just in case. This gives us a wonderful let-out because now we can all play politics with telecommunications masts. I hope that by listing those factors, I have given some indication of the kind of factors that operate in political life which prevent us from operating a rigorous, research-based and evidence-based approach.

In my concluding remarks and having said all of that, I wanted to say on a more positive note that there are lots of examples of how, in some ways, British public life is improving in terms of how we use evidence. Perhaps the most important decision that the Labour Government made was the one it made in the first few weeks, to establish the independence of the Bank of England and the Monetary Policy Committee. This was an enormously important decision and almost certainly a very good decision. What it has done is free economic policy from the traditional reliance on the Chancellor of the Exchequer dreaming up things in the bath to really quite a rigorous evidence-based approach to policy, in which the best experts in the land come together, discuss, research, express an opinion and publish transparently. The whole quality of economic decision-making has improved enormously as a consequence. It has become much more professional, more transparent and more evidence-based.

Related to that is the decision about entry to the European Monetary Union. I could score points saying that the government has procrastinated, but the fact of the matter is that they have established a whole series of very detailed, very professional studies on all aspects of the problem. When the decision is made, no-one can complain that there is not any evidence, because they really have been through the hoops. So there are some very major examples in British public life of evidence becoming important.

A third example is probably the most difficult moral issue which we had to deal with as MPs: the debate about stem-cell research in the last Parliament. As an example of an attempt to produce scientifically based and evidence-based decisions, it was an absolute model. The government decided from the outset that this was not going to be party-political and they were going to give us all the evidence we wanted. We had reports thrown at us, seminars organised by Yvette Cooper who was the Minister in the Department of Health. It was all done in a very thorough, professional way. I think it was the only vote in the House of Commons which I ever regretted – I voted against stem-cell research because the research which I saw persuaded me that it was not necessary. I think in retrospect that I voted the wrong way. But as an exercise in decision-making it was admirable and one of the few in British history, given the way that we have previously dealt with issues like abortion and so on, which represented a real step forward in trying to get people to think and analyse in an evidence-based way.

The final point I want to make is that those are all big, high-profile examples, but there are many little examples of the way that decision-making is being put onto a more professional basis. Decisions about health priorities through NICE; the way that food-safety is now dealt with through the Food Standards Agency rather than through the farmers pushing their own agenda; the way that regulations are now subject to fairly demanding tests of regulatory impact assessment; risk assessments being required in the police and fire services. There is a much greater emphasis in government on the use of evidence and objective criteria. Slowly and gradually it is happening. So I finish off on a positive note that despite my initial qualifications, evidence and research has a role and probably even a dominant role in the way that most decisions are being made.