



**Arguing the case for evidence-informed policy in a hostile
new era**

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Arguing the case for evidence-informed policy in a hostile new era

The rise of evidence

It appears that we are entering a new, more ideological era in which evidence-informed policy needs to be defended. By 'policy' we are referring to decisions made by local or central government about economics, rights and laws, regulations, police or military forces, welfare and other statutory services, many of which affect health. The belief that policy should be informed by evidence, derived from rigorous evaluations to ascertain what works, is relatively new. While there were isolated examples of large-scale studies to inform policy from the early twentieth century, for example, in agriculture and education, they were limited to relatively few countries. Archie Cochrane (p. 355) observed that: "It appears in general that it is Catholicism, Communism, and underdevelopment that appear to be against RCTs."⁽¹⁾ In many countries, decisions were made on the basis of ideology, such as Marxism-Leninism or belief in the free market, or what was considered innate knowledge, exemplified by the statement that "the gentleman [sic] in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves".⁽²⁾ (p. 317)

Policy evaluation and the concept of evidence-informed policy were born out of tensions between conservatism, liberalism and socialism that played out from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Conservatives argued that societies should stick with tradition as the basis of policy since it represented the tried and tested product of the collective intelligence of past generations. Liberals demanded policy innovations to promote individual rights. Socialists sought radical economic reorientations to achieve fairness. In response, scholars like Karl Popper, Robert Merton and Donald Campbell in the mid-twentieth century converged on a set of observations: that radical policy transformations were often grounded in unevidenced theories about how society should evolve; policies could produce unintended consequences (such as state tyranny, violence against ethnic or

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3 economic groups, and mass starvation); and the speed, scale and ideological basis of these policy
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5 transformations could leave insufficient time or appetite for assessment or amelioration. All three
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7 recommended that social policies should instead be focused on incremental change contingent on
8
9 empirical evaluation of effects. Popper proposed piecemeal social engineering underpinned by
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11 policy experimentation.(3) Merton proposed the importance of middle range theory informed by
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13 evidence to guide social policy.(4) Campbell proposed the 'experimenting society' as the ideal
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15 vehicle for progress.(5) Popper was a more overtly political writer than Merton or Campbell, who
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17 were academic social scientists. Popper supported social democracy as a form of government which
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19 could incrementally address the inequalities arising from capitalism, guaranteeing provision of
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21 education, health and welfare for citizens, and protecting civil and trade union rights.(3)
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27 In the liberal-democratic societies of the 1960s onwards, the idea that policy should be based
28
29 explicitly on evidence started to emerge in the political realm, coming to dominate policy discourses
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31 in the 1990s, in an era when centrist and centre-left parties governed much of the West. In this era,
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33 evidence-informed policy became associated with a 'technocratic, Third Way' approach to policy-
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35 making summed up in Tony Blair's phrase "what matters is what works".(6)
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39 **Ideology and defending evidence**

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44 While it is debatable whether policies adopted at that time were sufficiently evidence-informed or
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46 whether policy should ever be technocratic in the sense of being free from values, it seems that we
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48 are now in a different era. Edward Luce's recent survey of global trends suggests that: liberal
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50 democracies are declining and authoritarian regimes multiplying; new 'populist' politicians and
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52 parties are using rhetoric emphasising elite and expert corruption, their own singular ability to
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54 represent the people's will, and the need to challenge free movements of people and/or trade; and
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56 populists are exerting power via assuming office or pushing mainstream politicians and parties to
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3 more extreme positions. These trends are global with, for example: increasing authoritarianism in
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5 Egypt, Russia, Turkey and Venezuela; the election of populist governments in Greece, Hungary, India,
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7 the Philippines, Poland and the USA; and mainstream parties being pushed towards populist policies
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9 in Australia, the Netherlands and UK.(7)

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13 The ideal and the practice of evidence-informed policy is highly likely to be threatened by these
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15 developments. While it is possible for evidence-informed policy to be implemented in countries that
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17 are not liberal democracies, particularly where this is driven by international agencies (8) or happens
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19 to coincide with a government's ideological priorities, consistent use of evidence is unlikely where:
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21 governments are ideologically or personality driven; failures or the need for trade-offs between
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23 different, often equally desirable goals cannot be acknowledged; or scientific or other dissent is not
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25 tolerated.
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31 This increasingly ideological flavour of politics is partly rooted in disappointment with the results of
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33 technocratic solutions, which we share to some degree. Perhaps, evidence-informed policy was
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35 over-sold in the 1990s as the indisputable solution to all thorny policy challenges. As wealth and
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37 power have become concentrated increasingly in the hands of a few since then, ordinary people in
38
39 many countries are increasingly perceiving that they are being left behind. Their lives are becoming
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41 characterized by precariousness of employment, income, housing and, in some countries, food
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43 security.(9) Populist politicians create a yearning for an earlier time when they could take bold
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45 decisions if only they could 'take back control' from what are perceived as elites, such as 'experts'.
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47 There is a risk that policy-makers with more explicit ideological commitments, whether these be
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49 towards the left or right, will be less likely than centrists to believe they need evidence to know what
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51 to do.
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3 Indeed, 'what works' is evidently much less salient in political discourses than previously.(10) There
4 are plenty of examples of populists or authoritarians making public health policy without a basis in
5 evidence. The new conservative/far-right coalition government in Austria will not implement the
6 planned ban on smoking in public places.(11) The Australian government, electorally under pressure
7 from the far-right One Nation party, is proposing withdrawing welfare rights from citizens testing
8 positive for drug use.(12) The US federal administration is promoting abstinence-focused rather than
9 comprehensive sex education.(13) The Russian government has decriminalised some forms of
10 domestic violence.(14)

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12 We recommend that those producing evidence should play a more public role advocating for
13 evidence-informed policy and highlighting examples where policy at home or overseas is not
14 informed by evidence. Evidence-informed policy provides a means of resisting non-evidenced
15 policies, not merely of authoritarians and populists in Western countries, but also of regimes in
16 countries with no tradition of democratic government. Today's advocates of evidence-informed
17 policy can draw on the arguments first made by their earlier counterparts, namely the importance of
18 protecting society from the risks arising from the unintended consequences of policies with little or
19 no evidence base. To do so, those being trained to produce or use evidence should be educated not
20 merely about the technicalities of their trade but also its political roots and the rhetorical strategies
21 to communicate the importance of using evidence in policy.

22
23 However, as we now move from an era of centrist, technocratic politics towards a more overtly
24 ideological and, in some countries a more illiberal, period, Popper, Merton and Campbell's
25 arguments may be less persuasive now than in the immediate post-World War II era. Today's
26 citizens, at least in the West, have generally suffered less from the catastrophic consequences of
27 revolution, war and genocide, so unintended harms from unevidenced policies might seem remote.
28 They are likely to be sceptical of piecemeal progress associated as it is with centrist technocrats'

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3 perceived failure to protect real incomes, welfare entitlements and the environment. We need to
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5 convince these citizens that even if more radical policies are now needed, we still need to proceed
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7 incrementally informed by evidence. To support this, all citizens need to recognise the importance of
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9 thinking scientifically and critically rather than merely accepting what they are told, skills that
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11 schools should teach.
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15 We can strengthen our case by highlighting, in particular, examples of the unintended harmful
16
17 effects of unevidenced policies from across the political spectrum. We tend to alight on examples of
18
19 harmful interventions that fit our own political preferences. For example, in relation to the above
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21 examples, public health researchers leaning towards the left might cite evidence that abstinence-
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23 only sex education is more likely to lead to increased sexual risk behaviour than comprehensive sex
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25 education(15) or that decriminalising domestic violence will harm women's health.(16) But this risks
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27 suggesting to those on the left that they do not need evidence to know what does not work (as it is
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29 just obvious), and to those on the right that evidence-informed policy is a liberal conspiracy.
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31 Consequently, we need examples where evidence challenges leftist policies too, such as how
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33 abolition of private pay beds in the NHS stimulated the growth of the private sector,(17) or that
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35 increasing tax rates for the very rich may not generate much additional revenue.(18)
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38 39 40 41 **Limits to evidence**

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45 We also need to recognize the challenges to, and limitations of, evidence-informed decision-making.
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47 The production of evidence is, itself, not value free. A growing body of research, initially on the
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49 tobacco industry, but now extending to other powerful vested interests, has shown how the topics
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51 that are subjected to research, the methods used, and the populations and outcomes that are
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53 involved or prioritised can all be biased in favour of such interests, and how it is possible to
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55 manipulate the results obtained and the definition of what constitutes evidence similarly.(19) And
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3 the interpretation of evidence can be influenced by ideology. There is now an extensive body of
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5 research showing how individuals presented with the same evidence interpret it differently. Thus,
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7 when given exactly the same numerical data, but told that it relates either to the effectiveness of
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9 skin cream, which is uncontroversial, or gun control, which generates highly partisan views, the
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11 accuracy of interpretation of the former correlates with numeracy, while prior attitudes dominate
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13 interpretation of the latter.(20)
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17 We also need to acknowledge that evidence alone cannot tell policy-makers how to proceed. We
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19 recommend that evidence should be a complement to, not a replacement for, values and beliefs in
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21 informing policy. There is no contradiction between transparently drawing on beliefs, past
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23 experience and evidence to formulate and implement policy, and then generating new evidence to
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25 explore whether a policy has lived up to expectations. New evidence is not always needed, for
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27 example, when the consequences of a policy (such as votes for women) are not in doubt. We
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29 recommend, moreover, that evidence producers and users guard against cases where the ideal of
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31 evidence-informed policy is being manipulated to allow vested interests to block sensible policies on
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33 the grounds of lack of evidence. There are many examples from the history of the tobacco industry's
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35 corruption of science, including the industry's challenge to plain (standardized) packaging of
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37 tobacco.(21)
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43 We also need to recognize that there are risks that evidence-informed policies will themselves have
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45 negative unintended consequences that evaluations cannot protect against. A series of rational
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47 steps can together produce unforeseen and unwelcome endpoints. Such a process is imaginable, for
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49 example with the currently popular policy of conditional payments to promote healthy behaviours.
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51 Providing individuals with money additional to their welfare entitlements that is conditional on their
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53 adopting certain behaviours, such as vaccinating or enrolling their children in school or adhering to
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55 medical treatment, is an effective means of promoting health.(22) We can imagine that evaluations
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3 might show, as behavioural economics theory suggests(23), that the optimal approach is to provide
4 individuals with pre-banked payments but withdraw these in response to unhealthy behaviours
5 (although this hypothesis was not supported by a recent trial of approaches to smoking cessation,
6 highlighting the need for empirical evaluation).(24) Further studies might conclude that making
7 welfare entitlements contingent on healthy behaviour would amplify health benefits. Thus, a series
8 of evidence-informed steps might lead to an outcome which at the outset would have been
9 considered authoritarian and undesirable. Our point is not that this scenario will necessarily occur,
10 but that social engineering, even if it is piecemeal and evaluated at each step, can still produce
11 unintended harms.
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24 Following on from this, our final recommendation is for the continuing importance, not only of
25 evaluations of discrete interventions, but also of broader analyses of social transitions and the
26 cumulative effects of disparate policy changes. This supports rather than undermines our central
27 argument that it is now more important than ever to argue for the importance of evaluation and
28 evidence-informed policy in a new era of authoritarianism and highly ideological politics.
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37 **Key messages**

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40 We are entering a new more ideological era in which evidence-informed policy needs be
41 marginalised.
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47 To defend evidence-informed policy we need to return to the arguments forwarded by its
48 founders and show the potential harms of unevidenced policies both from the right and left.
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53 We need to recognise that the production and interpretation of evidence can be political, and that
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3 evaluation alone is an insufficient base for decisions or defence against bad policy.
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8 9 **Contributors and sources**

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24 Petticrew's in evidence-informed policy and private-sector influences on health; and Martin McKee's
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