

Evaluation in a dangerous time: Reflections on 4 years in a central policy agency in the Government of Nova Scotia

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Introduction

Why the reference to “a dangerous time” in the above title? I believe that we now live and do evaluation research in a period when governance in advanced democratic societies is unusually difficult. We face deep and far-reaching challenges—climate change, income inequality, disruptive technologies, globalised markets, and so forth—for which there are few low-risk, low-cost solutions. Far-reaching policy shifts are needed to manage or mitigate these threats, all with consequences we cannot fully anticipate. At a societal level, such circumstances give rise to social tensions, insecurity, and resistance to risk taking.

Political and policy leaders who strive to meet these challenges must navigate growing dissensus on the ways forward. While many citizens accept the need for tough policy choices, few are stepping up to bear the costs or take on the risks themselves. This anxiety and incipient conflict may account in large part for the political volatility

we now see in many jurisdictions, with frequent and sharp shifts in voting behaviours and upheavals within political parties.

This article presents reflections on these wider trends from the vantage point of a smaller “have not” province in Canada. After some 40 years as a university teacher and private research consultant, in 2009 I became Deputy Minister for Policy and Priorities in the Nova Scotia Government. The New Democratic Party (NDP)¹ had been elected to government for the first time and was determined to lead real change in a province that desperately needed growth and renewal. My position carried a mandate to facilitate “whole of government” planning and the implementation of “core policy priorities” across critical areas of political and public concern.

This role came to an end in 2013 when the NDP government was defeated after one term in office. I have spent much time since thinking about our successes and failures and their relevance to wider efforts to meet 21st-century political and policy challenges. This article provides an opportunity to share ideas with others who believe that evaluation research is (or should be) an essential component of modern policy development and the practice of government.

Transformative policy making

The first task for our new government was to gain the trust of the public service by mobilising the most capable leaders and giving them a meaningful role in elaborating the government’s policy agenda. To achieve this as quickly as possible, the Office of Policy and Priorities (a new central agency set up for this purpose) set in motion a process to develop a comprehensive policy framework reaching across, and hopefully aligning, all major programme areas.

Working groups, chaired by deputy ministers and composed of senior policy executives, were mandated to map out new directions

1 The NDP is a social democratic party functioning at national and provincial levels.

for economic growth, energy and environment, and education and social development. For fiscal policy, energy, and health reform, panels of external experts were set up to accelerate policy development and to build public acceptance of the government's new directions. A Premier's Council on the Economy was established, with prominent leaders from business, labour, and the community sector, to serve as a forum for ongoing consultation on policy initiatives as they evolved.

In February of 2010—only 8 months into the new government's mandate—a core priorities framework composed of 23 separate initiatives was approved by cabinet. Treasury Board assigned a notional allotment of \$170 million in new money above and beyond regular budget allocations to existing programs, many of which were themselves to be realigned within the new policy framework.

The Policy and Priorities Committee of cabinet, chaired by the Premier and with the ministers of finance and health as members, was put in place to review specific policy initiatives as they were refined and brought forward for cabinet approval and budgeting. Working groups of deputies and senior policy executives were empaneled to oversee planning and implementation and to drive cross-departmental collaboration and whole-of-government thinking.

There was a clear intention from the outset that monitoring and evaluation would be built into every programme initiative, and that the Office of Policy and Priorities would provide formative evaluation services on a continuing basis. Additional cross-departmental working groups were set up to consult internal and external stakeholders in key policy and programme areas, and to collate and analyse the programme data needed to support ongoing evaluation and new policy formulation.

The state of the province

The new core priorities framework was grounded in a rigorous assessment of economic and social conditions in the province. The evidence generated by this macro-level and strategic evaluation work identified two fundamental policy challenges facing by the new government in 2009.

First, with the lowest rates of economic growth of any province over the previous 20 years, rapidly falling revenues from depleted oil and gas resources, an entrenched structural deficit, and serious demographic challenges arising from out-migration and an aging population, the province faced a deepening fiscal crisis that threatened the sustainability of its core public services.

Secondly, despite continuous growth in programme spending well above GDP growth rates over many years, the key performance measures for economic growth, social wellbeing, and population health were almost all trending to the negative.

In other words, the province was in deep trouble, and, on a macro level, the government's major policy and programme systems were not generating outcomes of a quality and scale to change this outlook. The following are salient examples.

Despite 8% annual growth in health care spending over the previous decade, 45% of total government spending going to health care, and more physicians and hospital beds per capita than most other provinces, health outcomes were not improving. Nova Scotia had among the highest levels of chronic illness (heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and so forth), disability, and obesity of any province. Uncontrolled cost growth in the acute care and continuing care systems was eating up all available fiscal space, crowding out new investments in poverty reduction, housing, health promotion, and disease prevention.

In education, spending on public school education had increased 30% over 10 years, while enrolment levels had declined by the same proportion. Schools in the most populous suburban areas were seriously overcrowded, while those in most rural districts were operating at 50% capacity or much less. Nova Scotia students consistently generated scores on standardised maths and literacy tests among the lowest in Canada.

Over the previous decade funding for the province's 11 universities had increased by 10% per year, but half these institutions still faced severe financial challenges. Debt levels for students were among the highest in country, and out-migration of graduates was endemic. And despite our extensive university system, Nova Scotia ranked among weakest provincial performers in R&D.

Because over 90% of our electricity came from coal or oil-fired generators, our per capita greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollutants were among the worst in Canada. A heavy reliance on imported fossil fuels resulted in the highest electricity costs in Canada and made us extremely vulnerable to anticipated increases in world oil prices.

And finally, the province's aging population, high incidence of disability, and persistently high unemployment and underemployment, meant that poverty and social marginality were deeply entrenched in many rural regions and among marginalised urban populations. There were few signs of progress on any of the key indicators of social wellbeing, and in this instance government policies and programmes were woefully out-of-date and underfunded.

In summary, our initial evaluation work described a system of public services and quasi-government institutions that was costing more and more to maintain and that was not achieving mission objectives in almost every critical area. While the term is so over-used today as to be almost meaningless, in Nova Scotia in 2009 we were

suddenly confronted with the necessity for *transformation* across our core public services.

Core policy implementation

Implementation of the core policy framework, approved in early 2010, evolved over the following 4 years. There were notable successes, but more partial successes and outright failures.

Among the successes was an energy strategy that saw a rapid expansion of electricity production with renewables, putting the province ahead of most others in hitting greenhouse gas reduction targets and bringing our reliance on imported fossil fuels down from 90% to about 60%. Feed-in tariffs were put in place to incent new wind and tidal power generation, and to encourage local investment and community control.

In the healthcare field, a network of collaborative emergency-care centres was developed to improve access to primary care in rural regions. This innovation was one of the first in Canada to pioneer the use of multidisciplinary health care teams. The government also implemented new strategies for mental health and autism, and established a new purchasing regime to control the burgeoning costs of pharmaceuticals.

Early childhood development was another interesting transformation. The initial research and consultation work drew a picture of a highly fragmented system with \$100 million in spending spread across over 200 separate programmes, delivered by four departments, with little coherence or consistency across the province. The new strategy pulled most of these services into a unified programme structure within the Department of Education, targeted resources on high-risk families and communities, and provided access for all families to assessment and early intervention services for preschool children.

Similar root-and-branch analyses were conducted for continuing care and services for persons with disabilities, with similar findings of fragmented and inefficient services, lack of focus and accountability, and high levels of unmet needs. Ambitious strategies were elaborated in both these fields—continuing care, and services for persons with disabilities—through extensive research and consultation, with much of the leadership coming from community stakeholders.

In the social-housing field, the government mandated a new activist agency to develop partnerships with municipal governments, non-profit agencies and private developers to drive a significant expansion of the affordable housing stock in both urban and rural regions.

These initiatives were all successful in the sense that comprehensive new service models were arrived at with higher levels of stakeholder buy-in. However, such sweeping changes would take 8 to 10 years to bear fruit, and the NDP government did not get the second mandate needed to drive full implementation.

The most significant outright failures were in revitalisation of economic development policy and programmes and in the restructuring of the education system. In both cases, the government failed to win broad public acceptance of the nature and scale of the changes needed to address the province's demographic and fiscal challenges.

In both public schooling and post-secondary education, the government was not successful in getting stakeholder groups—school boards, parents' organisations, teachers and faculty unions, and university administrations—to accept the reality that the rate of cost growth across these systems was unsustainable, and that some degree of restructuring was needed to maintain and improve quality standards and to generate better outcomes for students, their families, and their communities.

For economic development, there was, in fact, widespread public criticism of the government's heavy commitments to job creation and

growth, particularly when it involved grants and loans to large corporate investors. While the government saw economic expansion as the only real solution to the province's fiscal and demographic challenges over the medium to long term, it became increasingly apparent that the general public, or its most vociferous spokespersons, did not share this priority. This was perhaps the biggest factor in the government's electoral defeat in 2013.

Lessons learned

Overall, and on balance, were our core policy processes and our commitments to service transformation successful?

In answer to this question, any objective observer would immediately state the obvious: the resounding electoral defeat in 2013 (the government went from 32 down to 7 seats in the legislature) was a verdict on the government's policies as much as on its leaders and political strategies. If the policies had been better, the public would have voted to carry them forward.

Defenders of the NDP government have argued that our policies were right, but we failed to communicate them. There is some truth in this, I believe: the policy fields where we met with the most success were the ones where we had the most far-reaching public and stakeholder engagement, and where we put the most effort into communicating the need for change to the wider public. If we had done more of this, we might have built greater public acceptance and support.

But that would not have been enough. With time I have become more convinced that the leadership in the government (myself included) really did not understand the nature and the scale of the changes needed to turn things around in the province, nor did we appreciate the extent to which the current structure and operations of government mitigate against transformative change.

As we all learned in Poli-Sci 100, government is the instrument of the collective will, the machinery with which a society or community pools its resources and empowers leaders to address shared needs and aspirations. If we live in a time when radical changes are needed to meet pressing economic, social, and environmental challenges, we must ask whether the current instruments of democratic governance are up to the job. Based on my experience in Nova Scotia, I would say there are five compelling reasons to be very concerned.

1. The most pressing policy challenges that citizens need their governments to address are complex, organic, and multi-dimensional, while government institutions are functionally siloed and rigid.
2. In a crisis, a society needs government leaders to communicate what needs to be done and show the way forward. But currently public trust in politicians is not high, and political leaders often find it expedient to avoid taking controversial leadership positions. In electoral politics, even during a crisis, there is much to be gained by telling “targeted voter blocks” what they want to hear, not what they need to know and understand.
3. The most capable and influential officials in the public service are trained and rewarded to focus on bureaucratic and administrative functions, while strategic planning, policy communications, cross-agency collaboration, cross-agency programme evaluation, and change leadership get insufficient attention.
4. The elected politicians who occupy senior executive roles in government are not policy experts, and most have little experience in managing large organisations with multi-billion-dollar budgets.
5. And finally, even if political leaders and public sector executive officers together commit to transformative change in government structures and operations, they often don’t have the data resources needed to make sound, evidence-driven decisions about what works and what doesn’t.

I will elaborate on these points.

The silos challenge

It is a simple reality that governments are collections of silos—policy silos, budget silos, people silos and data silos—and initiatives that require cooperation, resource sharing, project management, and evaluation across agencies can easily fall into black holes where no-one has responsibility, authority, and resources to make things happen.

Why is this a problem? Because any significant transformative change requires almost whole-of-government leadership, planning, and implementation. To make real headway on poverty reduction, for example, requires intensive collaboration among multiple agencies, inside and outside government, to drive changes in income supports, tax measures, access to education and training, disability services, job creation programmes, targeted health care services, housing, and so forth. There is no one department that is in a position to manage all these interventions, or that has the policy capacity, resources, and legislative and regulatory authority to command the support of other departments and agencies.

In Nova Scotia we had a budget of \$1 billion in a community services department that was responsible for four programme areas—housing, income support, disability services, and child protection. The department had four intake and case management systems, four un-linked client data systems (more, actually, because different regional units within the department had their own systems), and separate policy staff in each programme area, all to service a client population of some 60,000 people, most of whom needed services from two or more service silos. The majority of those people were also clients of the Department of Health, but there was no ability to share data or case-management functions across departments, both of which operated residential-care systems with different service

standards, separate capital budgets, and different employee unions.

I became convinced that even if we had doubled the spending commitment, with this delivery system we would not have made a dent in the levels of poverty and unmet needs in the province. Our government put huge effort into trying to transform this system, but after 4 years we had only just begun to make any headway.

Political leadership constraints

In a belated attempt to build public awareness of the economic and demographic crisis that was rapidly taking shape in Nova Scotia, in 2012 the NDP government appointed a prestigious non-partisan commission to consult policy experts, stakeholder groups, and the general public on strategies to generate growth in the province. (The commission completed its work 5 months after the NDP government was defeated.) The resulting report, known generally as the Ivany Report, presented a compelling case for transformative change across the public, private, and community sectors.

One of its most startling conclusions was that “politics as usual” would not provide the leadership the province needed to overcome its challenges. The commission recommended that the major political parties put aside partisan interests to build and implement a unified economic transformation strategy, almost like a wartime coalition government.

This speaks to the critical importance of leadership in a crisis. While the political risks may be high for politicians who point out the need for radical change, the consequences are much more ominous for societies that lack such honest and courageous leadership.

While many of the recommendations of the Ivany Commission have received attention from the provincial government and from the private and NGO sectors, the advice on unified political leadership has been largely ignored.

Nova Scotia is not unique. In the current conjuncture, across many different jurisdictions, we are not yet seeing the emergence of a new politics centred on building the public understanding and social solidarity needed to make real progress on the challenges we now face in the 21st century. In the NDP government we had policy control with resources and authority to plan and implement transformational change. We commissioned an independent, extensive, and non-partisan public review of strategies to address a widely recognised and dire crisis in Nova Scotia. But in the final analysis, transformational change was unlikely in government settings ruled by partisan interests. This suggests that those who see evaluation as a mechanism for transformational change may be wearing rose-coloured glasses.

Executive leadership constraints

Senior officials have full-time jobs administering departments, serving their ministers, and managing day-to-day crises. So, paradoxically, bigger initiatives to advance the government's policy agenda often end up as side-of-the-desk or after-hours add-ons. To counter this in Nova Scotia we set up deputy ministers' committees to drive cross-departmental accountability for outcomes, but in practice most functioned as show-and-tell forums and talk shops. Weak central agencies and cross-departmental committees do not integrate the silos, nor do they cut through the vertical authority structures that govern what public servants do, day in and day out.

I led a new central agency set up with the explicit purpose of leading whole-of-government initiatives, but we soon found we had only limited leverage to require ministers and departments to follow through on overarching policy commitments even after they were approved by cabinet. Departmental structures, legislative mandates, regulatory regimes, and the distribution of work roles among thousands of employees, all combine to create huge inertia across the system of government.

It is my view, after considerable reflection, that the senior executive leadership structure in the Nova Scotia public service would have had to be radically changed if we were to be a government capable of transformative change. Deputy ministers would have to have been chosen and mandated to be strategic planners and change leaders primarily (not occasionally), and they would have needed to spend 90% of their time working together to develop and lead multi-agency strategies and programmes, and 10% administering their silos, instead of vice versa.

Politicians aren't CEOs

Elected governments are composed of regular citizens coming into office from many different backgrounds. While legislators and ministers may have strong views and in-depth knowledge in specific policy areas, few are students of government *per se*, and even fewer have the training or experience to manage, let alone transform, huge bureaucratic organisations with thousands of direct employees and multi-billion-dollar budgets.

Ministers in departments set the policy directions and communicate them to the public, but remain detached from the hard-slogging work of implementation. Their interactions with senior public servants are an intense mix of mistrust and dependency. In the day-to-day exercise of power, the premier and cabinet ministers jealously guard their control of final decision-making, but senior public servants retain a dominant role in framing the issues and defining “reasonable” options. This is the quiet and relentless power struggle that underlies and shapes almost everything that government does.

In my observation, politicians do not readily take on responsibilities to evaluate the basic structures and workings of public services. Within budget constraints, they just want to give directions and have things happen, taking it more or less for granted that government

systems can deliver on their mandates. When problems arise and systems fail, there is much finger pointing and some deputy ministers' heads may roll, but political leaders show little willingness to take charge on bigger issues of governmental efficiency, productivity, and policy efficacy.

The time horizon for any elected government is 4 years or less, so big changes that won't deliver big positive results within such timeframes are risky at best, but more often politically damaging. The Nova Scotia NDP government's high priority on turning around the economy is the perfect case in point. In 2013 the lead opposition party ran on a platform of shutting down economic-development programmes and transferring the money to schools and hospitals, and they won the election in a walk. They reaped considerable political advantage from the controversial decisions the NDP government had made to invest in economic-development projects with long time horizons.

The failure to evaluate

One additional area of near complete failure in our Nova Scotia experience was the effort to build effective monitoring and evaluation into the implementation of our core policy framework. Everyone agreed on the need and value of evaluation, but in practice it often turned out to be a major black hole between the silos. With some exceptions we encountered a serious lack of evaluation expertise, commitment, and resources across government.²

2 One interesting note: I was 2 years into the job before I learned of the existence of the government's Internal Audit Office, a small unit with first-rate staff and really excellent evaluation capacities. It provided services directly to agencies and departments, but operated with almost complete independence from central agencies and policy and decision-making systems. We tried to bring it in from the cold, but it was too little and too late to add real value to our core policy work.

Programme-review processes started out with great ambitions to identify and delete unsuccessful policies and programmes, but most often ended up with simple across-the-board cuts. We learned that the plethora of one-off programmes and funding streams in fields like early-childhood learning and services for persons with disabilities was usually a product of frequent decisions at the political level to add on new programmes rather than face the blow-back from closing out or consolidating existing ones that weren't meeting identified needs.

All this was exacerbated by the weakness of programme data across government. We did an excellent job in developing our understanding of the wider socioeconomic, demographic and environmental challenges facing the province because we had access to Statistics Canada data and other big-picture information sources. However, in many narrower programme fields we could not generate useful analyses of specific programme impacts and outcomes.

So, while we could paint compelling pictures of the extent of ill health, poor education outcomes, weak economic performance and environmental threats, and conclude that our major policy and programme systems were not delivering adequate results, we had only limited evidence to link these macro-level perspectives to specific policy and programme areas. While this circumstance may have confirmed the need for radical change, we were limited in our abilities to develop strategies, road maps, and business-case analyses for policy and programme transformations.

These data constraints may be more or less unique to a province like Nova Scotia. Fiscally weak governments manage their fiscal challenges by cutting out programme systems that are seen as “nice to haves”, not “must haves”, and evaluation research can easily fall into that category. In my job I came to think of this as the Great Evaluation Paradox: governments with the greatest resource constraints should

do the most rigorous evaluation to optimise return on investments, but the opposite occurs. This is part of spiral-down syndrome that we encounter in any poverty environment: we are too stressed out with just getting by to invest time, energy, and scarce money to find new and more rewarding paths.

The Scottish model

My struggles to understand the workings of government and to find a way through all these barriers shifted radically with an encounter in 2012 with Sir John Elvidge. I had traveled to Scotland to look at fisheries policies and found myself sitting next to Sir John at a reception. A few hours' conversation led to our bringing him to Nova Scotia in 2013 to consult on structure-of-government issues. Through these encounters I became aware of a radically different perspective on the role of government in leading societal change.

Sir John was Permanent Secretary to the Scottish First Minister from 2003 until his retirement in 2010.³ After devolution of significant legislative powers from Whitehall to the Scottish Parliament, and in the lead up to the 2014 independence referendum, he was given a mandate to rethink how government worked in the country. As we had done in Nova Scotia, he initiated a comprehensive review of the government's performance involving his entire team of senior public servants. Sir John summed up the principal findings in a presentation to our deputies' table as follows:

Over several years, I became increasingly focussed on the intractability of several problems with major social and economic impacts: educational outcomes for the least successful 20% of young people;

3 For further reading on Sir John Elvidge's work, and on the Scottish model of government, see: <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/carnegieuktrust/wp-content/uploads/sites/64/2016/02/pub14550116191.pdf>
<https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2013/dec/13/scottish-government-re-designed-john-elvidge>

health inequalities related to socio-economic background; geographical concentrations of economically unsuccessful households; and Scotland's rate of GDP growth relative to the UK average and to that of comparable countries. (Elvidge, 2011, p. 32)

They found that, despite unprecedented levels of spending growth in these policy and programme areas over the previous decade, the most significant outcomes measures were trending negatively. That led to the stunningly obvious question that is so rarely asked within governments: why keep doing what we're doing when it isn't working?

While we had arrived at a similar analysis of our circumstances in Nova Scotia, Sir John and his colleagues drew very different conclusions on what was to be done. They determined that the essential structures of government would need to be transformed if better social, economic, environmental, and cultural outcomes were to be achieved. What has become known as the Scottish model was introduced in 2007. The following are key elements.

The Scottish national public service was restructured to become a single organisation rather than "a federation or network of functional agencies". In essence, they abolished departments and consolidated government policy development and operations within a single, unified structure, with one senior leadership team and one budget.

There is a system of team leadership at both the political and official levels, with the First Minister leading the elected government and the Permanent Secretary leading the unified public service. Ministers of the Crown are responsible for communicating and consulting on government policy and programme areas, but they do not command departments or have control over discrete budget allocations.

Senior leadership in the public services is provided by the Permanent Secretary and a team of six principal secretaries (equivalent to our deputy ministers). They oversee a unified budget and a limited number of whole-of-government strategies to achieve policy

goals set out by the elected government.

Policy objectives for the entire government were set out in a single statement of strategic purpose and a single framework of national strategic outcomes. A performance measurement and an accountability framework was elaborated with concrete measures to track progress on every national strategic outcome in real time.

The single statement of purpose and framework of national strategic outcomes was extended to apply for all municipal agencies, parastatal institutions, and non-governmental organisations that rely on the national government for funding and legislated authority.

In short, while we had only begun to identify the barriers to achieving transformative change in Nova Scotia, Scotland provided a working approach designed to overcome those very same constraints.

We could not of course replicate the model precisely in Nova Scotia, most notably because the Scottish government was in a much stronger position than our provincial government to act as a strategic leader. Health, education, social welfare, environmental protection, and local economic development are all administered by municipal government in Scotland, so the national government has a freer hand to act as an overarching funder, strategic planner, evaluator, and driver of accountability.

However, there are many aspects of the Scottish model that could be adapted to work in a provincial government in Canada. For example, semi-autonomous departmental or agency structures may be appropriate for the efficient delivery of large-scale services to the public, but the policy, communications and evaluation functions could be separated out and reconstituted within a unified operation covering all areas of government activity. By integrating these functions, separate from the line-delivery operations, governments could drive connected change and innovation across government more effectively. They would of course also need much higher quality

outcomes evidence than was available to political and public service decision-makers in Nova Scotia.

A provincial government could also redefine the roles of the political leadership relative to the public service, taking ministers out of positions of line authority over departments and agencies, but expanding their effectiveness in communicating the government's policy directions and consulting with communities and stakeholder groups.

A tool that could perhaps be most readily adapted from Scotland would be the National Performance Framework. Such a framework could transfer evaluation and social accountability to a formative cross-government setting instead of the current siloed settings. This could more effectively communicate to the public what government is trying to do, provide evidence on outcomes in real time, and generate evidence to support ongoing policy and programme transformations to advance the achievement of broadly shared societal goals. Any government can opt to build policies and programmes that have performance and outcomes measurement built into their most basic DNA, and can design job descriptions and training systems to produce public-sector workers and managers who measure and constantly change everything.

If any Scottish citizen, or any observer anywhere, goes to www.scotlandperforms.com they see the National Goals, the National Outcomes, and the National Indicators. The indicators are constantly updated and provide a clear picture of the government's successes or failures in pursuit of the basic objectives. Citizens have the same information as government leaders, which creates new pressures and incentives for government leaders to implement changes arising from evaluation findings.

Governments in Canada are moving towards much greater transparency based on open data systems, but it is another step altogether to align such data availability with the stated goals and objectives of

the government in power so that the performance metrics are available to all citizens.

Such transparency would create a new relationship between political leaders and the public. If critical performance metrics are publicly available as a matter of right, politicians would feel greater pressure to shift their focus from trying to shape or control what the public knows to talking much more honestly about what is going on in the economy, the society, or the environment, and why certain policies are right or wrong. It would engender much more of an *adult conversation*, very different from the spinning and key messaging that is so prevalent in our current political discourse, and that accounts in large part for the mistrust citizens feel towards their political leaders.

Concluding comments

In my experience working inside a government and as an external consultant providing services to government agencies, most evaluation research is focused on programme areas and involves efforts to measure inputs, impacts, and outcomes to determine if specific activities are well conceived, targeted on priority needs, and effective in achieving programme objectives.

The admittedly impressionistic analysis I have set out above suggests that most such evaluation work is about the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. To the extent that we are in the grips of an incipient crisis in our governance systems—energised by the gathering storm of environmental, socioeconomic, and political risks and instabilities—the transformations we need to be working on are not at the level of programs or even departments or agencies.

Evaluators, as a community, need to bring our knowledge-generation capabilities to bear on the very structure and operations of government itself in its relationships with the citizens on whose behalf it exercises authority and allocates resources. Evaluators also need to

address the massive built-in resistance to transformative change.

As a community, we need to evaluate and communicate learnings from different governance models and make decision-makers and the general public aware of real-world working systems that get better outcomes, starting—I would suggest—with those in Scotland and the Scandinavian countries.

We need to offer professional support to social movements to grow their leverage as agents of public education and attitude change, so that they can use evaluative knowledge to animate and facilitate public conversations about new models of governance.

We need to develop strategies to make evidence more broadly available to shift the discourse within political leadership groups and political parties.

And we need to do more “meta-evaluations”. My favorite example is education spending. It is relatively easy to identify in any given jurisdiction the distribution of resources (people and money) among early learning, public schools, and post-secondary education. There needs to be an evidence-enriched public debate about whether changes in such distributions could generate significantly better outcomes overall for the medium term on public health issues, labour market outcomes, poverty reduction, and other pressing concerns.

In closing, I would ask readers to think about this: as professional communities, doctors and lawyers are playing an ever-expanding role in shaping public knowledge and attitudes on a wide range of pressing issues—assisted dying, medical marijuana, the operations of the criminal justice system, mental health services, Aboriginal land claims, and on and on.

Could evaluation researchers—whether they are based in governments, academic settings, NGOs, or the private sector—develop a similar collective capacity to enrich the public discourse on the most

important public policy issues of our time?

I am convinced that without such interventions from people who generate critical knowledge to understand the challenges we face and how they can be managed or mitigated, our governance systems will play a less and less meaningful role in how our current century plays out.

Reference

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