

The use of evidence by the Cabinet Office: submitted to the 'My Science Inquiry' by the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology

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The use of evidence by the Cabinet Office

These are the annotated notes to accompany an oral presentation on 1 February 2017 to the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology.

1. I am here today to make a case for the Select Committee to hold an inquiry into the use of evidence, particularly scientific evidence, by the Cabinet Office. I am grateful to the Committee for offering me the opportunity to make this case.
2. The Cabinet Office describes its role as “supporting the Prime Minister and Cabinet and ensuring the effective running of Government”¹. Its responsibilities include “supporting collective government” and “helping to ensure the effective development, coordination and implementation of policy”². The Cabinet Office, with about 2000 staff, is unlike most Government Departments in that it does not have sole responsibility for a major area of public policy, but it does play an important role in devising and delivering policies, particularly those that relate to more than one Department³. However, recent experience indicates that the Cabinet Office currently has a problem with the use of evidence, particularly scientific evidence.
3. I believe that the Select Committee is uniquely placed to carry out an inquiry into how the Cabinet Office currently uses evidence, and to make effective recommendations to improve its operations. Two recent examples illustrate the problem at the Cabinet Office.
4. On 6 February 2016, the Cabinet Office issued a press release announcing that a new clause would be inserted into all new Government grant agreements from May 2016⁴. The clause was: “The following costs are not Eligible Expenditure: Payments that support activity intended to influence or attempt to influence parliament, government or political parties, or attempting to influence the awarding or renewal of contracts and grants, or attempting to influence legislative or regulatory action.”
5. However, the Cabinet Office soon faced a backlash, particularly from university scientists, when it became apparent that this draconian new rule would affect, for instance, researchers with grants from research councils and the Higher Education Funding Council for England⁵. The new clause could have, in theory, stopped researchers from using government grants from, for instance, giving evidence to Parliamentary Committees if there was a danger that it might influence policy. The backlash, including an official petition with more than 30,000 signatures⁶, eventually forced the Cabinet Office to withdraw the clause⁷.
6. However, there are still questions over how the Cabinet Office came to draft such a rule. Did it, for instance, consult the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government, or the Minister for Science? It is not clear. Extraordinarily, the Cabinet Office’s original announcement only cited a highly controversial pamphlet from the Institute for Economic Affairs called ‘The Sock Doctrine: What can be done about state-funded political activity?’⁸. The Institute for Economic Affairs is not an academic institute, and its website states that its role is to “promote the intellectual case for a free economy, low taxes, freedom in education, health and welfare and lower levels of regulation”⁹.
7. The Cabinet Office is, of course, entitled to consider evidence from any source, even a free-market lobby group which campaigns, for instance, to stop anti-smoking groups from using Government money to call for policies to cut lung cancer. But how many, if any, other external groups did the Cabinet Office consult? Did it consult, for instance, the Royal Society? Or was the Cabinet Office only interested in receiving evidence from an organisation with which ministers felt politically aligned, rather than from organisations that offered robust evidence, no matter how politically inconvenient?
8. While the Cabinet Office has subsequently produced a heavily revised version of the rule¹⁰ which will not deprive policy-makers of advice and guidance from Government-funded scientists, it is not clear that it has scrutinised its own processes to learn lessons from its aborted initial launch. The scrutiny from the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee could help ministers and senior

officials in the Cabinet Office to reflect on this sorry episode and to identify ways to prevent any similar mistakes in the future.

9. The second example is the National Flood Resilience Review, which was set up in December 2015 under the chairmanship of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Oliver Letwin¹¹. As part of the evidence-gathering for the Review, I attended a meeting of experts in March 2016 at the Cabinet Office, chaired by Mr Letwin and attended by members of the Review team from the Cabinet Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.
10. It became apparent during the meeting that the Review was not going to consider the risks from surface water flooding, which was extremely surprising since the Review's terms of reference stated that it would "carry out a new assessment of the damage that extreme rainfall could cause across England". Mr Letwin said that the risk of surface water flooding was not being considered because the most recent flooding event in winter 2015-16 had mainly arisen from rivers. Several experts told Mr Letwin that surface water flooding threatens more properties than either river or coastal flooding, and that in cities like London it could pose a threat to life, particularly for people living in basement dwellings.
11. It is not clear why the Review team from the Cabinet Office and DEFRA ignored the advice of experts, and no justification was offered in the Review's final report in September 2016¹². While the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Mark Walport, was clearly involved in some aspects of the Review, he did not attend the meeting with experts in March 2016.
12. This highlights one of the central issues that the Committee could explore. The Cabinet Office, unlike Government Departments, does not have a dedicated chief scientific adviser¹³, so how can it benefit from the services of the Government's network of chief scientific advisers? Perhaps it is time for the Cabinet Office to have its own chief scientific adviser, or at least, for the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser to have the Cabinet Office explicitly included within his/her responsibilities.
13. Of course, questions about the Cabinet Office and scientific advice are not new. Indeed, a previous inquiry by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee in 2011 examined 'Scientific advice and evidence in emergencies'¹⁴. Among its main recommendations was that the Government Office for Science, while remaining a semi-autonomous body, should be located within the Cabinet Office because both have "cross-departmental remits and a shared aim of helping departments improve their policy processes". The Government rejected this recommendation, claiming: "We believe that the Government Office for Science location in BIS [the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills] does not inhibit close and effective cooperation between the staff of the GCSA [Government Chief Scientific Adviser] and the Cabinet Office"¹⁵.
14. Much of the output from the Government Office of Science is excellent. For instance, in February 2015 it published 'Chief Scientific Advisers and their officials: an introduction'¹⁶. It states: "Departments are expected to produce and publish high quality science, research, and evidence strategies that link science to departmental objectives, and on which plans for future research investment should be based". The Cabinet Office does not appear to have such a strategy. The Committee would be well-placed to explore whether it is time for the Cabinet Office to have a science, research and evidence strategy.
15. The document published by the Government Office of Science devotes an annex to 'Developing a Science and Evidence Strategy'. It also has an annex on 'Science assurance', which raises important questions, such as: "Does your department have processes in place to ensure that science and engineering are embedded into policy making and that this evidence is robust, relevant and high quality?" It seems from the examples I have given that 'science assurance' in the Cabinet Office needs to be improved.
16. In summary, the Cabinet Office plays an important role in devising and delivering Government policy, but recent events suggests it may not be making the best use of evidence, including scientific evidence. An inquiry by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee could help the Cabinet Office to re-examine its processes and improve its operations. As part of an inquiry, the

Committee could take evidence from current and past ministers and senior officials and help to spotlight the reasons for recent failures. And in doing so, the Committee will be helping to fulfil its role in ensuring that Government policy and decision-making are based on good scientific and engineering advice and evidence.

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