

## Academy of Social Sciences in Australia

Colloquium, Monday 19 November 2007

### ‘Making Our Research Count’

- Research in the social sciences has, whether we like it or not, been drawn into the world of measurement, of impact, of KPIs. It is not enough to be reviewed well by our peers; we now have to have been used, quoted and so on. If there is a theme in my few remarks it would go something like this: ‘We must learn to measure what we value, otherwise we will be forced to value what we measure.’
- Our main problem is that we work with ideas rather than with findings. Yes, the ideas come in part from findings, but they also influence the search for findings.
- In general, mainstream natural science is different, though anyone reading what is going on in the ‘climate change’ domain can see that scientists are not immune to seeing what they do, and behaving, from within an ideological perspective.
- A great difference is that we tend to work with many variables, a lot of noise, and half-formed theory. In consequence, it is hard for us to establish a body of work that has the same force and validity as established theory in physics and chemistry. We therefore look second-rate, both by politicians and the natural sciences. Paradoxically, we often moan about our lack of clout in the political world, without apparently recognising that very scientists have ever been in positions of power, and that most of those who rule us have backgrounds in the social sciences and humanities.
- Of course, we do have data sets that can be worked on by other people, and they tend to get the same answers as we did. But our work is critically dependent on the time it was done and the society it was done in. It rarely has general effect, and it rarely has speedy effect. (One exception is well set out by Meredith Edwards in her study of policy. But we don’t have a lot of examples.)
- In my view, our principal effect lies in affecting the way people think about themselves and their economy and society. I think it is largely beneficial, though much depends on who is using what ideas when. But J. M. Keynes has said it as pungently as anybody:

“The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some

academic scribbler of a few years back.”

John Maynard Keynes,  
*The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, ch. 24 (1936).

- I have thought for a long time now that we (meaning organised social science, or the Academy) ought to study the effect that we have. I hoped that the two Academies would venture down that road when the ARC funded them to explore their futures some ten years ago (a program that I modestly claim to have invented in the late 1980s when I was chairing the ARC). It was an ideal opportunity to do such a job. Unfortunately, no one saw it that way.
- I should say at once that doing so might not make us popular, and would illuminate, perhaps uncomfortably, the way we work. But at least it would set us out as being different, and allow us to establish indicators for effect that we would then use and publish. I don't think that inspecting the extent to which we use each other's work does that job at all, but that is the present system.
- I recognise that many of us like to retreat to the most 'objective', measuring work that is available in our chosen field, for a number of perfectly valid reasons: (i) it looks like natural science, (ii) it is likely to survive criticism from funding authorities, and (iii) it avoids our having to get into ideological debate. I would want to say, as pleasantly as I can, that this strategy doesn't work in the long run, because all of us in the humanities and social sciences are affected in what we do and how we do it by our own view of the world.
- So I put forward the notion that the Academy might set out (along with the AHA) to put some energy and resource into an examination of the way in which the research work of the past has changed the way we Australians live, argue and perceive the world. We might start with politicians and journalists, though I think we would quickly move into school textbooks, films and TV miniseries.
- It won't be easy, and we mightn't get a lot of money to do it. But it's worth putting up as a serious, thought-out proposal.

Don Aitkin