

The Case for a Centralized Program Evaluation Function Within the Government of Canada

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To the Editor:

The purpose of this paper is to offer some views on the status of the program evaluation function as it currently exists within the managerial context of the federal government of Canada. My thesis is that the structural position of program evaluation fails to take into account the problems of interaction between evaluators and managers of government programs. Failure to deal with these problems has contributed to a sense of vulnerability among evaluation practitioners with possible implications relating to the perceived value of the function and its products. Without substantive change in the relationship of program evaluation to the management of the government of Canada, it is likely the function will not fulfill its promise in terms of providing a deeper understanding of the impact of government programs in relation to the achievement of national objectives.

Let me begin with some background. With the creation of the Office of the Comptroller General of Canada (OCG) in 1978, all federal government departments became subject to review by this new organizational unit responsible for overseeing the program evaluation function within the government of Canada. The position of the Comptroller General on the program evaluation function was expressed in the publication "Internal Audit and Program Evaluation in the Government of Canada" (1979). This position and the incumbent responsibilities of the function were subsequently codified in the "Guide on the Program Evaluation Function" (1981). This Guide provides the government's approach for organizing and conducting program evaluations.

Since the publication of the Guide, virtually all government departments have created program evaluation units. A review of these activities conducted by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada in 1983 revealed shortcomings in the manner in which program evaluations are carried out. In my view, concern with the quality and context of program evaluation can be seen as a subset of matters relating to the interactional characteristics between evaluators and those being evaluated. I suggest that four critical themes reflect the current reality for most managers of the program evaluation function within the federal bureaucracy.

1. Co-optation or Co-operation: Meeting the government's formal objectives for program evaluation and at the same time retaining good standing with departmental managers is a recurrent conflict confronting program

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evaluation directors. This is especially a concern for program evaluation managers in departments focusing largely on policy related issues or broad socio-economic objectives. In more narrowly defined areas of program delivery, program evaluation managers often accept the position that they exist only at the periphery of the management structure, and therefore have little opportunity to be viewed as part of the senior management team. Lack of clarity in the formal role of the function places a high premium on the value of co-operation in the choice future evaluation assignments. Such co-operation may not reflect an optimal level of outputs serving the broad public interest.

In other cases, program evaluation managers argue that "formal" program evaluations that meet government standards can create a barrier against the function becoming a full participant in future policy decisions. Rather, the appropriate role of program evaluation is to assist senior managers to resolve difficult or outstanding issues in the management of a department. Under these circumstances, the program evaluation function is seen as a helpmate to be co-opted into the resolution of departmental problems.

In the trade-off between co-optation and cooperation, however, it is rare for the program evaluation manager to embrace single-mindedly one position at the expense of the other. Such a position is difficult to maintain because of the role played by the OCG and the OAG in the ongoing monitoring and audit of the program evaluation function.

In operational terms, the program evaluation manager most often resides at a shifting mid-point between the two positions. This shifting focus causes the manager considerable stress. At the same time, the lack of clarity in the function in terms of an ultimate objective, can lead to an implicit rejection of the function as a reliable contributor to the overall management of the department. In effect, senior management lack a clear operational definition of the function and its relationship to the long-term stewardship of a department.

Because managing a department is seen to be a serious matter, there is little room for part-time players of whom senior management is uncertain. In terms of being a major contributor to the managerial process, program evaluators are considered to be too far removed from day-to-day managerial concerns to assess problems of departmental direction and control adequately. Program evaluators are seen as diagnosticians quick to identify problems but less capable of identifying viable solutions.

For the program evaluation manager working under these conditions, the problem is how to maintain open access to management's thinking, knowing that these managers realize they may need to defend themselves from a potentially damaging evaluation report. Solutions to this dilemma rarely satisfy the needs of both parties. The result is often an entente cordiale whereby senior management pays lip service to the program evaluation function, provided there is less than rigorous application of the Guide.

For some program evaluation managers, the major outputs of the function are the evaluation frameworks and evaluability assessments that may lead to future evaluation studies. In the meantime, the available resources

of the function may be diverted to more pressing managerial demands. Such diversion is difficult to resist particularly when the perceptive program evaluation manager has already assessed the risks of pursuing an independent interpretation of the role of the function. In such a situation, co-optating is seen as a more direct route to maintain the function than the risks associated with an intense commitment to program evaluation in its purest sense.

2. Client Ambiguity: Who is the "client"? Formally, the Deputy Minister of a department is the executive officer charged with the responsibility to relate objectively to the findings of a program evaluation study. Many program evaluation managers have abandoned this view as representing little more than an idealized interpretation of the concept of accountability. The reasons for this abandonment have to do with the program evaluation manager's understanding about the diversity of functions and constraints existing among the Deputy Minister, the Minister, Cabinet, program constituents, and the bureaucracy as a complex organization.

For the program evaluator, after having determined which evaluation questions will be addressed, the inevitable problem is to decide on the most appropriate strategy for presenting the study findings. Such a decision is usually grounded in an assessment of which receiver of the study is likely to place highest value on the evaluation outputs. A second consideration is which receiver is most appropriate to effect program change. While the Deputy Minister, theoretically, has the greatest potential to effect change, it is by no means certain that the implementation of change will emanate from the most powerful position within the departmental bureaucracy.

The difficulty of establishing an appropriate strategy for the presentation of findings affects the evaluator's decision on the tone of a report. All things being equal, the recipient of an evaluation known to be hostile will more greatly affect the presentation of findings than an indifferent recipient. Consequently, the interpretation of who constitutes the primary or secondary client of a study is a critical variable. Given the range of individuals with a direct or indirect interest in an evaluation the assessment of "who is the client" for the completed evaluation is not easy. This ambiguity in the informal reporting structure can affect the credibility of results. Not wanting to see the results of a study gather dust on a shelf, and with the knowledge that the Deputy Minister, or other senior managers, are not always the grateful receivers of bad news, the program evaluator cannot always with confidence respond to the professional obligation to present information that provides the best value for money.

3. Administrative Assistance: Confronted with shifting views on the primary function of program evaluation, the evaluator is often forced to accept a lowest common denominator approach to the definition of work to be done in a study. In the absence of clear statements of program objectives or measures of program effectiveness, a convenient option is to assess the efficiency of program delivery. This type of evaluation usually limits the study to a non-threatening review of the operational boundaries of the program.

While program managers may not enjoy the attention of a program evaluation dealing with operational efficiency, it is difficult to divert. In such a situation, the program manager usually expresses a degree of objective interest in the improvement of a program delivery apparatus. Indeed, it is a rare program that cannot benefit from a scrutiny of its delivery mechanisms. This type of review is seen as less threatening than other program evaluation options.

Given the evolutionary nature of most government programs, it is unlikely that any particular manager or group of managers will be found singularly responsible for shortfalls in administrative efficiency. Consequently, the relationship likely to develop between the program evaluator and the program administrator is a tacit agreement to limit the scope of the evaluation and thereby reduce the possibility of identifying highly negative findings on program impacts. For the program manager this strategy can be likened to a pre-emptive strike in the expectation that the evaluator will turn attention to a different program in the future. In this relationship the function of the program evaluator is maintained in the eyes of senior management while, at the same time, the program manager can control the perception of the evaluation results.

This use of the evaluation function by middle-level management is not in itself inherently damaging. Shortfalls in program delivery are usually identified and resolved with minimal acrimony, often with real benefits to all concerned. The question, however, is whether this approach represents the best use of program evaluation resources. In effect, this approach becomes a coping or damage control strategy on the part of the evaluator and the program manager. The ultimate aim of a program evaluation is to produce new knowledge on the impact of a program relative to its stated objectives. This is a substantially different function from that of an audit which attempts to assess the adequacy of administrative procedures.

The blurring of lines on the differences between program evaluation and audit may be pursued on the basis of economy or operational efficiency, but it is not an optimal solution to the problem of obtaining greater knowledge on the impact of government expenditures. Such information is essential to the future deployment of resources and program design. The need for this kind of information continues to grow.

4. Methodological Rigour: Partly as a result of the ambiguous structural relationship existing between program evaluation and the overall management of government, no consensus on the level of methodological rigour has been established within the profession. Consequently, program evaluators have been almost equally criticized as being obsessed with unrealistic methodological standards or, conversely, of bending over backward to please management and thereby compromise the scientific integrity of their work. This theme appears to ebb and flow in direct relation to whether the commentator is a manager concerned with the "big socio-political" picture, or another evaluator commenting on someone else's work.

Clearly, much program evaluation work does not meet very stringent scientific standards. Faced with the complexities of adhering to scientific standards yet still meeting the demands of managerial expectations, pro-

gram evaluators tend to modify conventional scientific standards in response to managerial concerns. The resulting studies rarely meet a standard exceeding the possibility of critical comment. Such commentary can significantly affect the long-term credibility of the program evaluation function in the eyes of the public and Members of Parliament alike.

While not exhaustive in terms of reflecting all critical issues raised by program evaluators themselves, the foregoing highlights one major observation; none of these problems can be resolved easily within the current organizational structure for program evaluation within the federal government. Program evaluators, despite their powers of persuasion, have not completely assuaged concerns about either their role or their performance.

Whether expressed by Members of Parliament, senior management, or program evaluators themselves, concern about program evaluation has become a topic of considerable debate. In an era of government downsizing, the program evaluation function appears increasingly vulnerable.

Confronted with the possibility of a reduction in the available resources applied to program evaluation units, as well as the voluntary redirection of evaluation resources to non-evaluation activities, the problem becomes one of assessing the damage likely to accrue to a diminishment of the function. Given that a sizeable portion of the problems identified in program evaluation is attributable to the ambiguous position the function occupies within the federal government system, it is incumbent upon senior management to assess whether a structural solution is available to improve the situation.

The delegation of authority to departments to establish program evaluation units followed a tradition well established within the federal government. The expectation that the needs of the departments would be better served by this arrangement has not always proved itself. Although acknowledging failure is not easily done in any bureaucratic system, ongoing decisions tend eventually to reflect perceptions of reality. There remains, however, a need to obtain new and better information about government programs.

The first consideration is whether there is some benefit to be derived from a reassessment of program evaluation as a significant analytic tool for governmental decision making; second, if benefits are identifiable, how best to re-define the function to reduce the current level of structural ambiguity.

The answer to the first question is that in the absence of reliable alternative means to analyse the impact and cost effectiveness of government programs regularly, program evaluation remains a major tool. Second, the most appropriate location for the function is within a central agency, possibly within the Office of the Comptroller General or some other group directly accountable to Parliament. Of course, with a direct accountability relationship to Parliament, the fundamental character of program evaluation would change from an internal function to an external relationship in the operation of government. Such a change in character may effect a degree of social distance in the function which would not adequately reflect the political concerns inherent in all program design. These concerns lie at the heart of the process of establishing an appropriate evaluation frame-

work. What then are the benefits to be derived from centralizing the function?

1. With a centralized program evaluation, a greater degree of control over the standards used in the function becomes more feasible. Regular procedures of review and challenge would be available without generating internal departmental problems associated with a potential loss of authority related to the function.

2. Information generated by program evaluators would be under greater control in terms of providing a broad interdepartmental context. Further, the possibility of crossing departmental lines to conduct complete program assessments would be facilitated. Currently, the situation leaves a large number of programs beyond the range of individual departmental program evaluation units. Results of the evaluations could then be assessed by government leaders in an atmosphere unaffected by the program evaluators' fear of career implications resulting from having produced adverse findings. Therefore, a major threat to the credibility of findings would be removed — the lack of objectivity generated by intradepartmental pressures.

3. With better control over the resources allocated to program evaluation, it would be possible to develop a priority schedule for evaluating all government programs. Under the current arrangement, choice of program targets is greatly affected by specific departmental interests. A centralized system would encourage a targeting of programs that would better reflect the requirements of the government. This system would also permit greater adherence to the critical requirement of timeliness — a factor frequently criticized in the current program evaluation system.

4. It is often the case that specific program evaluation methodology is applicable to other programs located in other government departments. The current system does not capitalize on the acquisition of knowledge in this critical area of disciplinary development. Program evaluators located in various government departments cannot be expected to remain current with all developments in the field without the assistance of central control. Furthermore, there is a certain professional pride in developing unique approaches to evaluating programs. Unmonitored innovation is an insufficient means of facilitating better understanding of the most cost-effective methods of completing evaluations and adhering to appropriate scientific standards.

5. The new standing committee system of parliamentary control will probably require increasingly expert testimony to address fundamental questions on the impact and cost of government programs. Departmental officials are the most likely candidates to appear before these committees. Faced with the perception that departmental witnesses are likely to be biased, it is necessary to consider the role that can be played by a centralized program evaluation function.

6. Lastly, one potential role of a centralized program evaluation function involves the review of information included in the Part III's of the Main Estimates. While departmental program evaluation functions are capable of reviewing this information in a manner that can shed light on the subtlety on impacts associated the expenditure of public funds, this type of activity

is difficult to undertake within the normal round of departmental evaluations. Given the often interacting effects of government programs a centralized system would maintain the advantage of a broader view of program effects. The assessment of program impacts in relation to the stated objectives of the Part III Estimates could offer a substantial benefit to parliamentarians. In the new committee system of parliamentary control there is an opportunity for program evaluators to present the review of Part III estimates to individuals with the opportunity to maintain close contact with complex program structures; thereby, strengthening Parliamentary accountability.

Without an audacious move to retain the benefits of program evaluation under an umbrella of central control, it is unlikely that the promise of program evaluation will be fulfilled. This loss is greater than either the discipline or the government deserves. Its continuity will not entirely pass, but its utility will be diminished as an adjunct of the academic world where the techniques of program evaluation will continue to survive as a fundamental approach in the application of scientific principles.

References

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