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THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S EVALUATION STRATEGY: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE CENTER

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Abstract: In the six years since the Australian government's evaluation strategy was set in place there has developed a substantial and growing emphasis on the conduct and use of evaluation. It is notable that Cabinet places considerable priority on having evaluation findings available to better inform its deliberations and decision-making. The article focuses on the attitudinal changes, institutional arrangements, and formal requirements that have led to this emphasis on evaluation. The central role of the Department of Finance as catalyst and coordinator is also analyzed.

Résumé: Depuis les six dernières années, la mise en place d'une stratégie d'évaluation de programmes par le gouvernement australien a aidé à promouvoir l'importance de la conduite et l'utilisation des évaluations de programmes. Il est remarquable que le cabinet des ministres considère une priorité d'avoir les résultats de ces évaluations de programmes disponibles en vue d'accroître la qualité des débats et prises de decisions. Le présent article se concentre sur les changements d'attitude, les arrangements institutionnels et les prérequis qui ont mené à l'emphase mis sur l'évaluation de programmes. Le rôle du ministère des Finances comme catalyste et coordinateur est aussi analysé.

When the Australian government initiated a process of public-sector reform in 1983 it was with the intention of achieving improved efficiency and effectiveness in government activity. A suite of reforms has been progressively developed and implemented since 1983 and has included managing and budgeting on a program basis, the creation of mega-portfolios (each portfolio comprises a line department and a number of related agencies), systems of published forward estimates of budget outlays and of cash-limited running costs, commercialization and user-charging, a portfolio approach to budgeting, improved reporting to Parliament, and a systematic approach to program evaluation (Keating & Holmes, 1990).

These reforms have been designed to achieve "value for money" in government programs, with a considerably greater focus on program outcomes as well as on access and equity. The reforms have also been intended to help the government prioritize its activities, and to help achieve a considerable overall reduction in government expenditure when it seeks to do so and to increase expenditure in a more targeted way when that is appropriate.

Underlying the reforms has been a concern to place much less emphasis on processes, compliance, and controls per se. The overall philosophy is that a bottom-line focus on outcomes is best achieved by providing considerable devolution and autonomy to program managers. At the same time, there has to be commensurate accountability.

It was in this climate that the government's evaluation strategy was developed. The main elements of the strategy were agreed by Cabinet in 1988 and were designed to help achieve value for money by both encouraging and requiring program evaluation to be conducted (Mackay, 1992).

The evaluation strategy has three main objectives. It encourages program managers within portfolios to use evaluation as a standard and commonplace management tool; the underlying idea is that any competent manager who is concerned with achieving program objectives and fulfilling the needs of his or her client groups will use evaluation as a matter of course. Use of evaluation as a management tool can also be promoted by creating a climate of expectation that evaluation will be conducted and used.

The second objective is to provide fundamental information about program performance to aid Cabinet's decision-making and prioritization, particularly during the annual budget process, when there is a large number of competing proposals on the table.

Lastly, the strategy aims to strengthen accountability in a devolved environment by providing formal evidence of program managers' stewardship of program resources. The emphasis is on *transparency*. This is of interest to Parliament, in particular in the Senate Estimates Committees' processes of budget scrutiny and approval.

The first and third objectives aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of individual programs. The second objective focuses on prioritization *between* programs. All three objectives are concerned with achieving value for money.

EVALUATION STRATEGY: FORMAL REQUIREMENTS

The main components of the strategy agreed by Cabinet are the formal requirements placed upon portfolios and the range of services that the Department of Finance offers to portfolios. Some observers have questioned the apparent contradiction between the existence of formal requirements and the devolutionary philosophy of the reforms; this issue is discussed below.

The main formal requirement is the preparation of annual portfolio evaluation plans (PEPs). Each portfolio minister is required to prepare a PEP and submit it to the minister for finance. Each PEP has a three-year coverage, relating to *major* evaluations—that is, those with major resource and/or policy implications—and is intended to focus mainly on outcomes and effectiveness issues. Other evaluation activity is encouraged, and each program is required to be evaluated every three to five years.

PEPs are strategic planning documents that have a number of advantages. They:

- encourage portfolios to plan and conduct their evaluation activity systematically;
- encourage a strategic approach to program management, planning, and prioritization;
- provide a forum for ministers' involvement in strategic planning for programs;
- create an expectation that evaluations will be conducted;
- encourage the completion of evaluations in a timely manner; and
- provide an opportunity for Finance to make suggestions about evaluation priorities. In doing so, Finance focuses on the likely information needs and priorities of Cabinet in future budget rounds.

The second formal requirement is that ministers' new policy proposals include a plan of action for evaluation that will be followed if the proposal is accepted. This provides Cabinet with the opportunity to determine the scope and timing of future evaluation.

The third and last formal requirement is that the completed reports of evaluations listed in PEPs normally be published. This requirement is relatively recent (1990) and is mainly an accountability tool: it leads to the wider dissemination of evidence on program managers' stewardship of program resources. It also leads to scrutiny of the quality, rigor, and objectivity of evaluations.

The devolutionary philosophy of many of the reforms can be summed up in the phrase "letting the managers manage." But program managers within portfolios remain accountable for the performance of their programs. Indeed, with the considerable relaxation of central controls, there is an added premium on accountability for program outcomes. Evaluation has a central role to play in these circumstances, and hence the emphasis on formal requirements for the planning and conduct of evaluations. (This is essentially an approach that "makes the managers manage.")

In addition, a key responsibility of Finance is to ensure that Cabinet gets the information it needs for its financial decision-making and prioritization. Thus it is important for Finance to ensure that the quantity, quality, and timeliness of evaluation is satisfactory. The PEP process and the other formal requirements provide a window of opportunity for Finance to influence, and help determine, the evaluation agenda of portfolios.

EVALUATION STRATEGY: ROLE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE

Finance's Activities

Finance plays a major role at both the strategic and operational levels. It is the principal architect and overseer of the government's evaluation strategy, and it has had a major influence on the design of the three formal requirements. At the operational level, Finance is involved in two ways. The first is its provision of a range of services to encourage the conduct, quality, and use of evaluation. In this regard Cabinet has given Finance the mandate to:

- offer a limited consultancy service by assisting in the conduct of individual evaluations;

- promote evaluation training. The one-day evaluation workshops conducted by Finance have had 1,500 participants since the start of 1991;
- prepare guidance material and disseminate examples of best practice;
- prepare a register of published evaluation reports. Over the past two years, the registers have reported the methodology and results of about 290 major evaluations. This information is particularly useful to evaluators who are investigating comparable issues or who might be able to use comparable methodologies; and
- help develop informal networks of evaluators. The main network is the Canberra Evaluation Forum, which meets monthly.

Finance *offers* these services to departments and agencies, who are free to choose to accept them or not. (This assistance "helps the managers manage.") Of course, the extent to which these services are taken up gives an indicator of the "value added" that Finance is perceived to provide. Many of these services are provided by Finance's specialist evaluation unit, which is part of the Evaluation and Statistical Services Branch and employs seven evaluators. This specialist unit also monitors the progress made by departments and major agencies on the conduct, quality, and use of evaluation. It provides detailed feedback on the quality of individual PEPs as planning documents, and identifies and disseminates examples of best practice. It also monitors the role of high-level evaluation planning committees and of central evaluation units within portfolios.

The second way in which Finance is involved at the operational level relates to the role of Finance's supply divisions. These constitute the central part of Finance's activities and comprise about 250 officers. They oversee the funding of each portfolio's programs and provide policy advice on them to Cabinet. Supply divisions provide advice on each new policy proposed by portfolio ministers, and also, when asked, assist Cabinet and portfolios to develop savings options of those programs that might be considered inefficient, ineffective, or of low priority.

Supply divisions are often able to suggest which programs in each portfolio might be considered to be performing inadequately. They make suggestions to portfolios about the desirable content and program coverage of PEPs, and seek to participate in major evaluations.

To assist in this process, Cabinet has indicated its expectation that Finance will participate with portfolios on selected evaluations; of course, evaluation is clearly the responsibility of, and is "owned by," departmental managers. That said, it is notable that of the 155 evaluations that had some influence on new policy proposals submitted by portfolios in the 1992–93 budget, Finance officers had participated (at the invitation of portfolios) in around 60%; in most cases this participation could be considered major (compared to, for example, participation in a steering committee or working group) (Department of Finance, 1993).

Synergies in Finance's Activities

Finance plays an important role as a central coordinating agency and adviser to Cabinet. The juxtaposition of this influential position with its responsibility to encourage and facilitate evaluation can have a positive impact on agencies' responses. The central role of Finance in spending and accountability issues ensures the attention of portfolios. Thus Finance's advocacy of evaluation as a worthwhile activity is more likely to be influential with portfolios than if evaluation had been the responsibility of a stand-alone, specialist organization that was perceived as tangential to mainstream government activities; it could be argued that the Canadian government's Office of the Comptroller General falls into this latter category.

This should not be taken to imply that evaluation activity would have been minimal in the absence of Finance's advocacy of it. Evaluation and review activity has been emphasized in some portfolios—and in particular has been conducted by a number of research bureaus—for many years, particularly in the areas of industry regulation and protection, employment, and social welfare. But the substantive involvement of Finance helps ensure a considerably greater breadth and depth of evaluation activity for government programs generally. Although the Audit Office has suggested that Finance should be even more proactive in that regard, a balance has to be struck between Finance's involvement and portfolios' ownership of their evaluations (Auditor General, 1991a, 1991b).

Another advantage of the juxtaposition of activities within Finance is that it ensures an immediate and direct influence on the central supply division functions of Finance itself. Before the devolutionary reforms of the past decade, Finance was heavily involved—some might even use the word *mired*—in the minutiae of departments' and agencies' spending activities. Thus if a department wished to spend more on postage or lighting, for example, it had to mount a detailed and persuasive case to Finance. With the reforms that have been implemented in the areas of running costs and forward estimates, this type of detailed involvement would now be regarded not only as irrelevant but also as highly intrusive.

The focus of evaluation is largely on bottom-line outcomes and value for money. Emphasizing this focus has been a key factor in reorienting the activities and philosophy of Finance's supply divisions away from an overwhelming preoccupation with funding details and an emphasis on spending cuts. Nevertheless, government budget priorities need to be met, and it might be hoped that less effective programs would be the casualties in any cutback in government expenditure. It would be wrong to claim—and few would believe—that the culture within Finance has fully changed; such a change takes time. A substantial shift in attitudes has, however, occurred, perhaps much more than is generally appreciated (Sedgwick, 1993).

One enduring function of Finance is to act as devil's advocate, by seeking to identify whatever flaws might exist in the spending proposals put forward by ministers and their portfolios. A concern that Finance might use evaluation findings against the proposals advocated by portfolios has led some portfolios to be reluctant to involve Finance in either the planning of evaluation activity or the conduct of individual evaluations. However, most portfolios are aware of the potential benefits from Finance involvement, and this has led to a reasonably high level of cooperation with Finance. No one is interested in financing ineffective programs.

Portfolios have come to appreciate that the conduct of rigorous evaluations in which Finance has been involved is a useful way to enlist our joint ownership of and commitment to the evaluation findings. This commitment has often eased the passage of new policy proposals through the budget process.

Moreover, the greater emphasis on a portfolio approach to budgeting has meant that portfolios are often expected to prioritize their activities and to fund their new policy proposals from their own savings options; this also puts a premium on evaluation results. Of course, evaluation is not simply a means to identify savings options;

it is in fact rarely the case that adverse evaluation findings lead to the simple abolition of a program. (There have been few, if any, instances in recent budgets, for example.) It is much more common for program objectives or operations to be modified, to a greater or lesser extent. The emphasis is on improving performance.

A final benefit from Finance involvement is that it can draw on a wealth of evaluation experience, spanning the entire range of government activities. Thus by involving Finance, program managers in portfolios can tap into this experience, and this can help them conduct rigorous, well-focused and thus better evaluations. This assistance is particularly valuable for those portfolios with a less well established evaluation track record. We are prepared to provide whatever assistance we can, within our modest resources and with the cooperation of portfolios, in identifying and understanding best practice.

PROGRESS WITH EVALUATION SO FAR: CONDUCT, QUALITY, AND USE

Conduct

In encouraging evaluation in government departments and agencies an initial emphasis was to increase the *quantity* of evaluation activity. As already noted, there has been a long history of evaluation and review activity in areas such as industry regulation, employment, and social welfare. This had been fostered by the existence of a number of specialist economic research bureaus—such as the Industry Commission, the Bureau of Industry Economics, the Bureau of Labour Market Research, and the Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics—and by the periodic undertaking of major policy reviews, such as the Cass review of social security in the mid-1980s. Parliamentary reviews and efficiency and other audits conducted by the Audit Office have also contributed to the pool of evaluation and review findings.

It could, however, be argued that the extent of evaluation in many of these areas was uneven and tended to be neither systematic nor regular. In addition, many portfolios did not have a history of evaluating their programs, in part because of the difficulties in evaluating particular government activities such as the provision of policy advice.

The net result of these influences was, according to anecdotal evidence, that when the government's evaluation strategy commenced in 1988 only a modest amount of evaluation activity was being conducted, and that activity was very unevenly distributed across portfolios. In subsequent years the volume of evaluations being conducted has grown sharply. An analysis of PEPs reveals that the number of major evaluations listed in PEPs as being either in progress or about to commence has increased from 55 in 1989 to 250 in 1993.

Most evaluation activity is more narrowly focused than the PEP evaluations, emphasizes narrower efficiency or process issues, and is conducted by individual departments and agencies primarily for their own program management purposes. Finance is usually not directly involved in such evaluations, and so no count of their total number is available. But anecdotal evidence suggests that the volume is significant and is increasing. This is also confirmed by recent reports prepared by the Audit Office (Auditor General, l991a, l991b).

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the formal requirement to prepare PEPs and to evaluate each program every three to five years, together with the emphasis in the reforms on outcomes/results and on improving performance, have provided the main impetus for this substantial growth in evaluation activity.

There has been only modest success with the formal requirement that ministers' new policy proposals include an evaluation plan of action that will be undertaken if the proposal is accepted. Feedback from portfolios indicates that this requirement is onerous for portfolio managers during the busy budget period. Only about 30% of proposals broadly met this requirement in the 1993–94 budget, although an additional 50% of proposals included a clear undertaking to evaluate the proposal if accepted (Department of Finance, 1994).

Quality

The quality and usefulness of PEPs as strategic planning documents has clearly increased markedly since their inception in the late 1980s. Now that evaluation has become more commonplace and widely accepted, attention is increasingly focusing on various dimensions of evaluation quality and on ways to improve these.

Three problematic dimensions of quality are:

1. The rigour of program evaluations. This is related to considerations of expertise and objectivity. Expertise is dependent on training and experience. It is probably the case—as is believed in most portfolios—that the most useful experience is rapidly generated simply by conducting evaluations, that is, learning by doing. More advanced evaluation skills, such as survey design, sampling theory, cost-benefit analysis, and econometrics, are acquired with much more difficulty, although these can be brought in via consultants. Objectivity in evaluation is in some ways more difficult to attain, as it requires appropriate attitudes and perhaps, even, the existence of an "evaluation culture" in an organization. From the perspective of Finance, a number of program managers, as distinct from the more senior portfolio managers, and the central evaluation coordination units in portfolios have not been predisposed to ask the hard questions or reveal problem areas when conducting evaluations of their programs. The Audit Office has argued that portfolios should set up central oversight procedures to ensure quality control of evaluations conducted (Auditor General, 1992).
2. The coverage of evaluation activity. This relates partly to the systematic evaluation of all programs on a regular, systematic basis, consistent with the formal requirement that all programs be evaluated every three to five years. Most but not all portfolios meet this requirement. For those programs that are evaluated there has sometimes been a tendency to steer the evaluation away from the difficult questions or suspect areas of a program. This is related to the issue of objectivity.
3. The timeliness of evaluations. Evaluations that have been commissioned by Cabinet or that portfolios have scheduled in the PEP planning context are often undertaken with a particular deadline in mind, such as a particular budget round. There have arisen cases where evaluations have not been completed in sufficient time to feed in to Cabinet's deliberations. On occasion this has resulted from a shortage of skilled evaluators in the portfolio concerned, combined with overambitious and unrealistic deadlines. But there have also been one or two cases where a portfolio has claimed that an evaluation has not been completed (and is therefore una-

> vailable to Finance), but the portfolio has nevertheless quoted selectively from the evaluation "findings" in its submission to Cabinet. Fortunately, these are not extensive problems, although they require careful monitoring.

There is no easy solution to such difficulties with the quality of evaluation. However, they can be expected to diminish as evaluation skills and experience become more widespread, as an evaluation culture becomes more embedded in the public service, and as the reforms change management. The involvement of Finance officers in particular evaluations provides portfolios with an additional source of evaluation skills and an external, and hopefully objective, perspective that can help to overcome obstacles to quality evaluation.

Use

Portfolios' use of evaluation findings in their internal program management is an activity in which Finance is not involved, consistent with the philosophy of letting the managers manage. Anecdotal information from portfolios, together with the Audit Office's findings so far, suggest that portfolios' internal use of evaluation findings is reasonably good, but uneven; there is definite scope for further improvement. This conclusion is reinforced by a joint (unpublished) review by Finance and the Department of Employment, Education and Training of the latter's evaluation activities.

The quantity and quality of performance information provided to Parliament has increased considerably in recent years, especially in the annual program performance statements that are tabled at budget time. However, a number of commentators have emphasized the scope for Parliament to use this information, including evaluation findings, much more actively (e.g., Holmes, 1991).

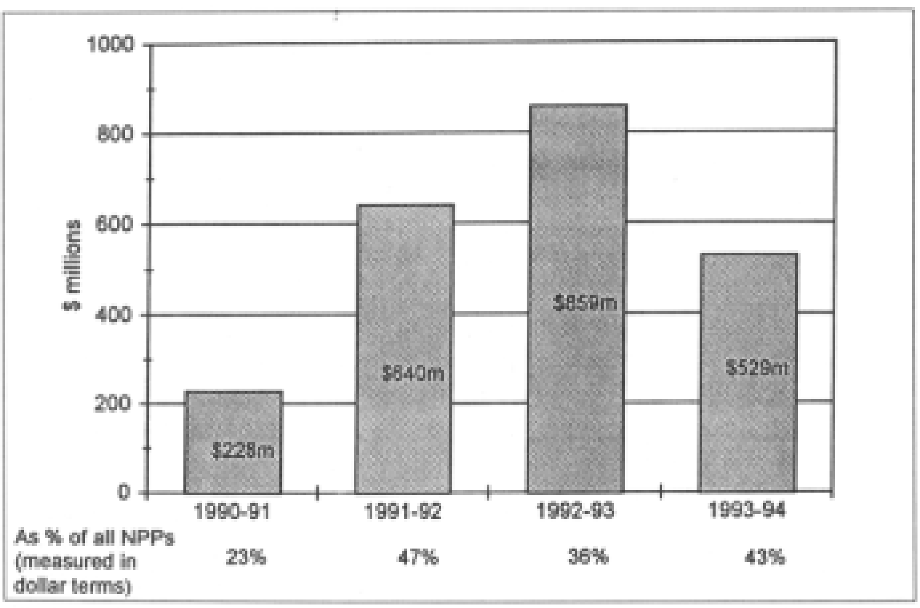
From Finance's perspective a major use of evaluation findings is in the budget process—that is, in assessing priorities and reviewing new policy proposals and savings options put forward to Cabinet for consideration. The following discussion therefore focuses on the use made of evaluation in the budget context.

Figure 1 reveals that the influence of evaluation on the new policy proposals put forward by portfolio ministers has increased significantly over the past four budgets. In the 1990–91 budget some $230 million of new policy proposals were directly or indirectly influenced by the findings of an evaluation; by 1992–93 this had risen to about $860 million, although the figure declined to $530 million in the following budget (Department of Finance, 1994). The *proportion* of new policy proposals influenced by evaluation rose from 23% in 1990–91 to a high of 47% in the following year, and 43% in 1993–94. Evaluation influenced about 58% of savings options in the 1993–94 budget.

Of more concern is the finding that the "success rate" of new policy proposals accepted by Cabinet in 1993–94 was the same for those proposals influenced by evaluation as it was for proposals not so influenced.

These results underscore the observation that evaluation findings are only one of a number of sources of information on and influence over Cabinet's decision-making. Others include the government's evolving policy agenda, and urgent economic and other imperatives; the relative importance of these will vary from year to year.

Figure 1
The Influence of Evaluation on New Policy Proposals



Other findings from the detailed Finance survey of the 1992–93 budget (the corresponding figures for the 1991–92 budget appear in parentheses) include:

- Finance officers, who attended the relevant Cabinet meetings, judged that evaluation influenced about 30% of Cabinet's decisions (60%) and that in almost half of these decisions (three-quarters) its influence was significant.
- About 155 evaluations (160) had some influence on the proposals and options put to Cabinet.
- Cabinet commissioned specific evaluations, and determined their scope and timing, in about 20% of its decisions (almost 40%) (Department of Finance 1992, 1993).

These findings indicate the importance that public servants—in their preparation of the details of new policy proposals and savings options—and ministers attach to having evaluation findings available. Overall, it has been very important to have had the active support of key Cabinet and other ministers in encouraging portfolios to plan and conduct high-quality evaluations.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

A unique feature of the 1993–94 budget was the commissioning of a series of major program and policy reviews. The reviews were commissioned by Cabinet in the context of the government's concern to reduce the budget deficit to around 1% of GDP by 1996–97. Thus the government stated:

> Taking account of an analysis of outlays trends across all portfolios together with Ministers' own reviews of portfolio priorities, the Government is putting in train a program of reviews, extending the Government's normal program evaluation activity. The reviews will focus primarily on areas which have been subject to rapid outlays growth in recent years or which for other reasons are seen as offering scope for program improvements. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1993b, p. 3.13)
>
> The focus of the reviews is on delivering programs so as to achieve their objectives more effectively rather than eliminating programs. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1993a, p. 1.4)

Some 46 reviews were commissioned by Cabinet and announced in the budget, with most focusing on issues of effectiveness and appropriateness. The reviews relate to programs that collectively cover 50% ($58 billion) of total Australian government expenditure, and are in the areas of health, community services, social security, veterans' affairs, employment, and education. A menu of review topics and their terms of reference was initially proposed by Finance, with the final choice made by Cabinet.

The reviews were commissioned at short notice, and will be invaluable in identifying new policy options and helping to prioritize among them and existing policies. Almost all of the reviews are to be available for consideration in the 1994–95 or 1995–96 budgets.

The reviews illustrate the value Cabinet places on having evaluative information available to assist its decision-making. Perhaps the best way to regard the reviews is as being complementary to the normal cycle of PEP evaluations, rather than being a substitute for them or reflecting any deficiency in the system of PEP evaluations. The former allow an urgent response to emerging budget pressures, and the latter allow a measured and progressive coverage of programs and of important program issues.

It is unclear at this stage whether substantial numbers of reviews will be commissioned in future budgets.

CONCLUSION

There is growing evidence of a dramatic increase in the quantity of evaluation information available since the Australian government's evaluation strategy was set in place six years ago. The use of evaluation to better inform Cabinet's decision-making and prioritization has also increased considerably, and this use can be expected to grow as the existing "library" of available evaluation findings continues to expand. Of course, evaluation remains only one of a number of influences on Cabinet's decision-making.

There appears to be scope for Parliament to use evaluation findings and other performance information much more intensively. More detailed scrutiny of portfolio and program performance by Parliament would strengthen the accountability framework and send very positive signals to portfolios on what is hoped and expected of them. It would reinforce substantially the government's evaluation strategy.

In terms of the conduct, quality, and use of evaluation, the progress achieved by different portfolios remains uneven, although the general trend is toward a definite increase in the quantity of evaluation information available. There appears to be considerable scope for further improvement in the quality and use of evaluation findings within portfolios. Progress in the use of evaluation in the annual budget process is encouraging. Clearly, there remains a need to persevere with the evaluation strategy and to build on the progress already made. The major set of reviews of programs and policies, commissioned in the 1993–94 budget, constitutes a significant reaffirmation and reinforcement of the priority that the Australian government attaches to evaluation to assist it in its deliberations.

Much of the progress achieved so far can be ascribed to:

- the implementation of a number of public-sector reforms that emphasize bottom-line outcomes;
- the existence of the formal requirement for portfolio evaluation plans; and
- Finance's stewardship of the government's evaluation strategy, plus its strong advocacy of evaluation as a tool to help achieve value for money.

Finance is well placed to continue its central role of catalyst and adviser: it has the commitment to do so. But the strong support and cooperation of departments and agencies is needed in developing and disseminating best practice and ensuring that quality evaluations are well understood and effective in decision-making generally, but in the budget preparation in particular.

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