

INTEGRITY IN PUBLIC LIFE: THE JIM CARLTON LECTURE

The Jim Carlton Lecture is jointly hosted by *the Centre for Comparative Constitutional Studies (CCCS) at Melbourne Law School and Accountability Round Table (ART)*

Melbourne University Law School
The David P. Derham Lecture Theatre

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1830

**Accountability: Do programs work? (and how can we find out?)
'Through a glass darkly...'**

Prof. the Hon. Peter Baume, AC

You are an eminent group and what you are highlighting through this series of lectures needs to be highlighted for the public good. Society owes you so much.

There are so many eminent people on the board, people I know and just admire. It has been a pleasure to watch Fred Chaney on video and to read Lindsay Tanner and Michelle Grattan - all people I respect enormously. It has been a pleasure to work with Barry Jones on this lecture, as it has been a pleasure to work with him on other matters.

By the way, it was possible, many years ago, to work with Neal Blewett, a political opponent, on an urgent problem for which society needed urgent action that transcended party lines for the good of Australia.

It was good of you too to name this lecture for Jim Carlton. But it was fitting that you did so. Jim Carlton was our friend. We both knew him and Di and the children over many years and often interacted with them socially. His gift of his organs after his death was noble and helped society. There is someone in better health now because of him and what he did. This was typical of the man we knew. We should all do it.

He was articulate and a powerful speaker. We did not agree on economic policy but his views on probity, and integrity, were the same as mine.

In his last few months he had a brawl with his successor in the seat of Mackellar just before her preselectors made a decision that she should not be re-endorsed. They had had enough of her. The brawl Jim Carlton had was because what she had done was not right, not because it was not legal, and Jim Carlton was a fighter for the values he thought were right, whether or not things were legal.

We remember in London, a thousand years ago, when Jim told us that the girl who lived next door - the girl he was taking out - was especially nice. We met her and agreed that she was super. He got engaged to her, and married her, and she remains our close friend too.

Today let us continue to speak of integrity in public life.

When one looks at the speakers you have chosen and the subjects you have chosen the matter of probity and integrity runs through them. So you have made us consider corruption, corruption within political movements, the detection of corruption, the purpose of allowable political donations (and the NRA in America is an example of how not to go), the difficulties of reconciling opposing valid beliefs, and more.

Today we will look at two different types of probity. We will deal with evaluation and accountability and we will look at integrity in political communication. Let us deal with that matter first.

Integrity in political communication

Put simply, most activities are like coins – they have two sides. One side has the costs. One side has the benefits and that structure - a two sided coin - is true of almost all proposals.

Most often, there are costs and benefits, there are winners and losers. Some people are better off; some people are worse off.

Consider a new toll road being built in my City. Winners will include far commuters from the distant suburbs who will use and benefit from the new road; losers will include many inner city dwellers whose homes are being demolished for the new road. There are both and both sets of arguments need to be recognised and considered.

Consider a government that tightens welfare eligibility. It will stop more cheats accessing welfare but it will also stop some genuine needy people from accessing welfare. It will do both and both sides of that argument need to be recognised and considered.

Let me tell you a story from long ago about the Women's Branch of the Liberal Party of Western Australia. It proposed to me that the supporting parent benefit should be curtailed. Then one of the women stood and sobbingly announced that the benefit had been her lifeline after her marriage broke down. Then another sobbing woman followed her. And another. There were lots of tears. The original proposal was forgotten; they had seen the other side of the coin.

In public life generally we get one party arguing one side of the coin, and the other party arguing the other side of the coin. What each side of politics says is accurate, but is incomplete.

The statements of most politicians are unbalanced. They present only one side of complex issues.

They treat us like mugs.

And that is somewhat dishonest. It is misleading, when people talk only of some of the relevant arguments.

A diversion. In Cabinet, we dealt with 80% of the agenda in twenty minutes because the merit of the arguments was overwhelmingly in favour of one side. But we then spent hours on the other 20% because costs and benefits, arguments for and against, winners and losers, were all of them substantial.

When matters reached the parliament, most of the 80% was supported by all parties. The headlines were matters in the 20%.

We had an honest and complete discussion in the cabinet room but then we had a political management discussion and often, as a result of that, went back to arguing only some points in public.

And what we citizens need is balanced debate. We need both sides of the coin. We need the arguments for and against. We do not need slogans. We want to make up our own minds about difficult issues.

We actually want to know that if we keep mining coal for example, we will help others to add to the world's load of greenhouse gases and we will help others to make climate change worse.

But we also need to know that our national budget depends on coal and that employment in certain areas requires us to mine coal.

We want to make up our own minds on a balance of those two valid lines of argument.

Likewise, it is correct to say that less rickety fishing boats coming here mean fewer deaths at sea and it is correct to say that an inhuman industry in Indonesia has been closed down. But each person then has to balance that with the inhuman ways we treat people in the Manus Island and Nauru camps.

We have to work out for ourselves if one desirable result requires us to act so badly towards refugees.

And not to present both sides is dishonest and unhelpful in so many instances.

Accountability and evaluation – whether programs work

The second matter we will look at is accountability - whether programs work , whether resources are effectively used and how we might get the answers to those matters.

And we might think about why we want to do it anyway - we could use those evaluation resources in the programs themselves - for example, to provide more houses or more schools.

My assertion is that programs for which we pay should be justified by the outcomes they produce. If we do not know and if we do not seek to know any answer about outcomes then that is an issue of integrity in itself.

And I believe that knowing is better than guessing, It is better than an ideological assertion, and is certainly better than not even trying to know.

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, then it is not good enough for people just to tell us what they intend to do or what they hope for sometime. They have to go further and tell us what they have achieved - so we can decide as a community of voters, if enough has been done.

And to do this those running programs will have to measure what they are achieving.

After all, if we admit patients to a psychiatric hospital and they kill themselves (as they do occasionally) or kill others, (as they do occasionally) or, five years later their psychiatric condition is just as bad, (as it sometimes is) then we should be able to say openly that we have failed. – but how often do you hear that said.

Or, if we have illicit drug prohibition as policy we are entitled to know what effects it is producing.

On the one hand we might discover that there is less general use because the drugs are illicit.

On the other, we will discover that the illicit drugs are in every school and that there is more corruption because the drugs are illicit and that we have an epidemic of illicit drug use anyway. By the way, on that one, look at what the prohibition era did in the United States.

If you do not know what you have achieved, and if you continue to boast about your programs, that is a kind of immorality.

Let us consider programs. They have inputs, they have structures, they have processes (or what is done), and they have outcomes. and they exist within a milieu of public opinion and public values.

Let us consider that milieu.

Some politicians put effort and time into creating a certain milieu and work to change that milieu from time to time, so programs can be changed.

It is important. Programs are not possible politically unless the values and beliefs of the public are sympathetic.

When, many years ago, black leaders approached Huey Long, then Governor of Louisiana, to complain about the lack of black girls in nursing training, he then went on radio, cynically, to tell the people of Louisiana that young white maidens were forced to handle the genitals of old negro men because all the nurses in Louisiana were white.

In so doing, with deliberate racist imagery, and deliberate racist language, he changed the community values in that State overnight. He changed the milieu. He appealed to the racist sentiments of the time, and to the racist sentiments of his supporters, but then was able to introduce immediate programs to train black girls as nurses.

Similarly in the early years of this Century, the story of Iraq having weapons of mass destruction was advanced. That country and its leader were dehumanised. The values and attitudes of societies were changed. And only then did western nations go to war with Iraq.

Sadly Australia was among those nations.

By the way, there was no parliamentary debate. There was no parliamentary endorsement of the decision.

Of course, no weapons of mass destruction were found.

Was that an immoral act?

Enough of milieu.

1. Inputs

What about inputs - the next part of programs. These are most often money, but could be personnel, time, or effort.

How often have you heard politicians talk solemnly about the numbers of dollars they will spend over the next four years.

Four years is interesting. It just happens to be after the next election when they might no longer be in power.

They make these promises especially just before elections or on budget night.

They are talking about inputs. Inputs of money in this case.

Now any of us here could stand under the shower tearing up fifty dollar notes. We would get rid of a lot of money and we would produce nothing.

So there is no guarantee that inputs, however large, will, of themselves, produce outcomes. And it is dishonest, it is misleading, when politicians boast to us about inputs - and stop at that point.

We all know of corrupt nations where inputs of money are diverted into the pockets of other people. Money goes from us taxpayers here in Australia, but there are no desired outcomes in those nations.

We as citizens should not be fooled by talk of inputs. It should be no more than a statement of intention to do something. It is a prelude to action. It is not actually the action that does something.

So talk of inputs alone is somewhat misleading and somewhat dishonest.

2. Structures

What about structures - the next part of programs?

Building a hospital is not the same as treating sick people.

Many of you will remember the story of Sir Humphrey Appleby and the empty hospital. It featured in the "yes Minister" series.

You will remember that no-one in that hospital complained about queues, no one complained about the food, or the parking, or anything. But no-one was treated either. So the hospital was useless as a hospital.

The building of a school does not guarantee education for anyone. The erection of a building on a university campus does not, of itself, guarantee that anyone will get any educational outcomes. The erection of a building for Government does not guarantee that anything useful will follow.

The creation of a committee or a commission of enquiry is not the same as producing a desirable outcome for anybody.

So structures do not, of themselves, justify what governments do.

3. Processes

Now let us look at processes. What is done. There are many stories about people being very busy and achieving nothing.

In the Air Force in my time you could "slope off" by putting a clip board under one arm and walking briskly around the air base for hours. No-one stopped you. No one questioned you. You were obviously busy. But you were not achieving anything - except wasting time.

So doing things is not necessarily achieving anything.

People facilitate, people co-ordinate, people rationalise. They are all processes. They do not guarantee that outcomes will follow. One time the wheat board asserted to me that it did all the process things - it co-ordinated, it facilitated, and so on. Finally it admitted it sold wheat. Then it admitted that it was ignorant of whether any wheat had been sold and it was certainly ignorant of how much.

So doing things is not the same as producing some result. And it is somewhat dishonest to say that it is.

For example, holding a plebiscite is not the same as legalising same-sex marriage. By the way, on that one, the French have it right. Everyone has a civil marriage in the town hall, and then some people have a church marriage. Doing that and getting rid of any civil disadvantage that gay men or women might experience, avoids much of our problem.

4. Outcomes

And then, finally, there are outcomes.

These are what programs should be about. About what happens. About what changes occur. They are more than good intentions.

So, a housing program should house people.

A National Disability Insurance Scheme should do what it says; hospitals should treat the sick; schools should educate people, and so on.

To know about outcomes means one has to measure outcomes. And that, in turn, means that money must be built in to allow this to happen. And it means that we want our politicians to tell us what has been achieved and then to use those results to guide further policy.

Let us consider why evaluation is important and what it leads to.

Actually it is about many things.

Think of an onion with many skins, or think of one of those Russian dolls with smaller dolls within them.

Each time you go down a layer you are faced with a new onion or a new Russian doll.

At the most superficial level evaluation is a form of program justification. If this is all it is to be, then expect a lot of resistance from potential losers - they are likely to claim that not enough effort was put in to the programs to produce good outcomes or that the wrong things were measured.

Evaluation at this level is a threat. And many people here will know from bitter personal experience that some departments of Treasury stop at this level.

Evaluation is also about policy coherence – making sure that everyone is aiming for the same thing.

Evaluation is also about information transfer, passing necessary information to other levels of a hierarchy about what works and how it works.

It is also about management and is a tool that managers use. Knowing what works and the circumstances in which things work.

But at the deepest level evaluation is about power.

Power is the commodity that is valued most in politics. Evaluation information makes people powerful. It makes the public powerful.

If a program is working it makes a government powerful. It makes those offering successful programs powerful. It makes those running successful programs powerful.

If one reverses the situation, it makes those who lack evaluation results less powerful.

Some senior people try to keep evaluation knowledge secret to increase their own power.

Wilfully not to know and to use public resources carelessly when we all think that they should be used carefully is not acting with integrity.

There is a kind of immorality in not knowing where one has been, when one has arrived, where one is going.

There is another issue you might consider. This is the whole question of unmet need - and evaluation might allow one to know how great this is. Consider public housing. If it is available for only 10% of people needing it how does one value that?

Does one say that 10% is better than 0%? Or does one increase the program to cover the waterfront? Or does one say that those still on waiting lists are "undeserving".

Consider the many users of illicit drugs for whom no service is available or for whom there is no place in an existing rehabilitation service at the magic moments when they seek to change.

Consider the victim of domestic violence for whom there is no available place in a refuge at a time of crisis.

Governments often have a model "display" service but leave a high level of unmet need.

This was driven home to me when we studied those with disability looking for work. The government of the day (Barry Jones might have been a member of that government) actually provided some help - for about 15% of them. Which of course meant that for 85% of them there was still no help available.

So there is a different issue of morality and integrity here - unless there is a promise and action to covering those not covered.

So the bottom line is that it is not sufficient to have a "model" "show" program if provision is otherwise woefully inadequate.

Conclusion

What you are doing here in lectures like this is asking governments to examine the many forms of immorality or failure of integrity which they practise all too often.

Maybe they consider us members of the public as dopes willing to incorporate the half truths that they offer and unwilling to find out which of their programs produce the expected results.

Barry Jones has recently pointed out that a diminishing percentage of voters is supporting the major political parties - I hope they are worried and taking note of that phenomenon.

Tonight we have discussed two other forms of immorality in public life, for not knowing is a form of immorality, as is presenting only one side of complex arguments.

You are enriching society by offering these lectures.

Jim Carlton would have approved of what you are doing in his name.