

Why truth and power don't mix

Aid agencies and the search for knowledge

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The recent National Intelligence Estimate of the US intelligence agencies concluded that Iran had abandoned its nuclear weapons programme in 2003.

This remarkable ?exception that proves the rule? shows that it was indeed possible for intelligence agencies with enough independence to make factual judgements at odds with the ?Official Truths? of those in power.

Lessons about the adverse effects of the usual mixing of truth and power are hardly new. Over the centuries, much has been learned from the success of the sciences about the search for knowledge, and how science is corrupted by the incursion of those in power who think they have the Truth. Examples include the Soviet Union declaring that Lysenko's genetics was ?Soviet science?, and the Catholic Church's clash with Galileo.

Power corrupts the ecology of knowledge ? the conditions under which knowledge grows and flourishes. Those in power in an organisation tend to enshrine their views as the Official Truths. Experimentation, debate, and the exercise of critical reason are curtailed to stay within the Official Wisdom. To those in power, staff members who argue against Official Truths only reveal their unreliability, their inability to play with the team, and their lack of fitness for positions of authority. Insiders who argue against Official Truths outside the organisation ? particularly in public view ? are in effect traitors; they are ipso facto disloyal to the organisation itself.

Thus critical reason yields to bureaucratic conformity, a community of development researchers becomes a company of intellectual clerks, and honest and open debate gives way to an organisational ideal of agreement, accommodation, and ?going with the flow?. The result is a society satirised by Kant as the Arcadian ideal where people would be ?as good-natured as the sheep they tended?.

Barrington Moore, a Harvard social theorist, noted that ?among contemporary social arrangements the modern Western university ? has endeavoured to make intellectual criticism and innovation a legitimate and regular aspect of the prevailing social order?. The university does not set itself up as an arbiter of truth; it takes no Official Views. There is no official Harvard theory of this, or Oxford theory of that. The university, ideally, is an arena in which contrary theories can be examined and adverse opinions can collide in open debate. This means open intellectual competition instead of bureaucratic accommodation. Thus there seems to be little reasoned basis for an agency that is dedicated to promoting development knowledge to adopt, explicitly or implicitly, Official Views on the most complex and subtle questions facing humankind. It is unclear, at least to the author, which part of this argument the leaders of development agencies

don't understand or accept.

How development agencies might work

The agency should see to it that clients hear the best arguments on all sides of complex questions ? and make the final decisions. Albert Hirschman argued that it was also imperative to ?divorce the exchange of opinions about suitable economic policies from the actual aid-giving process?. It is important that clients are genuinely committed to reform and to learning, even with Incorrect Views (e.g. China), and that mechanisms of learning from experience by the client and the agency are part of the project.

Finally, on the complex questions of development where knowledgeable people differ, alternative approaches should be allowed to compete and be implemented within the confines of the same open learning organisation. There is no royal road to learning, no road that bypasses real competition and local experimentation ? even within the agency itself. Those in power should heed Keynes' admission that ?we all hate criticism. Nothing but rooted principle will cause us willingly to expose ourselves to it?. Instead of aspiring to Official Truths, the agency should aspire to a self-critical fallibility or Socratic humility of knowing that one does not know, and then on the basis of ?rooted principle? to promote the knowledge processes that have been shown to be so fruitful for achieving genuine progress in problem solving.