THE STRANGER AT THE DOOR

Barry MacDonald

"Nobody wants to be evaluated by anybody at any time."

(House, 1973)

The thrust of my argument can be expressed in the form of an amendment to House's dictum:

"Nobody deserves to be evaluated by anybody at any time."

An evaluation is a judgement of comparative worth. In programme evaluation, with which we are primarily concerned, the comparison may be with a displaced activity, a parallel innovation, or an untried possibility. Investment, usually of public money, is at stake, and losers get nothing.

Worth is inherently open to dispute. No index of worth is value free and no two programmes have an identical value structure. Neither do they enjoy parity of opportunity to demonstrate their merits. Each is embedded in particularities of circumstance that shape their expereience in ways that mask their essence, their transcending transferrable virtues.

But judgements of worth have to be made. There isn't enough money to back every horse in the race and even if there were, it makes sense to look for likely winners. The pilot [innovation] projects to which we are attached accept this. They expect to be judged. By what? By the degree to which their hopes and promises have been fulfilled? Certainly, but not by that index alone. Only the timid deliver in full. Innovation is not for the faint of heart; it's hard, damned hard. By what else then? By what they have learned perhaps, about the structure of the problem in relation to the structure of their response. These are pilot projects, probes, not models. The policies they inform should aim to fail more marginally next time. That's progress, and it is poorly served

by summary judgements of failure of the pretence of success. What
else? Well, aren't our projects entitled to be judged by whether they
have acted intelligently and with integrity in the light of their
constraints and opportunities? That would be reasonable, I think, and
I am arguing for reasonableness in evaluation. We tend in our
evaluations to lump together the innovation and the innovators, yet
it is surely essential to our purpose that judgements of worth do not
conflate design and performance.

Is it any wonder that project people worry about external evaluation,
and treat the person called 'evaluator' as a problematic, unpredictable
and potentially damaging presence? Given the difficulties of judgement
to which I have alluded, they are naturally anxious about any single
judgement having special authority or status. Look at the situation from
their point of view. We are imposed upon projects - they have little or
no say in our selection. We have an interest in their survival throughout
the period of funding (our employment depends on their's) but none of
their further success. We serve the needs of others. We invade their
privacy and autonomy, and fatally undermine their boundary control. We
carry no proofs of personal integrity nor, in this new field, a portfolio
of previous achievement.

Now let's look briefly at the structure of the working relationship
between project people and ourselves, as it might be conceived by them.
They work, we watch. They sweat, we count the beads of perspiration.
They labour, we observe and interpret. Their risk is mocked by our
immunity. Our presence suggests they are not to be trusted, our role
suggests they are incapable of objectivity, of explanation, of hind-
sight or foresight. Only the unperceptive, the naively trusting, the
overly optimistic and those who think evaluation doesn't matter a damn
anyway, fail to take measures to counteract the imbalance of advantage.
There are many possible tactics and I guess that as a group we have
been confronted by most of them. They can restrict our access, and
thereby our knowledge base, by patrolling the boundaries of their
site vigilantly, imposing cumbersome protocols of entry that are both
difficult to meet and restrictive of opportunity and by criticising

the evaluation loudly for even minor breaches of agreement. Since we
don't know yet how to do the job of evaluation very well, we are
vulnerable to charges of incompetence, and the determined project
director can do a pretty good job of devaluing our performance. Another
popular option for the project is to press the evaluator to declare
his personal educational values, thus enabling the evaluator's judgements
to be categorised as merely one man's opinion. Or, and this appears
to have been a widespread tactic in the Transition from School to Work
programme, projects can co-opt their evaluators making patrons or even
partisans of people who might otherwise develop into dangerous critics.
Co-option is as big a temptation for the evaluator as judgement. Projects
are usually undermanned and overburdened, they always have teething
problems, they usually welcome constructive advice at the outset. And
evaluators are there, extra hands and heads, and usually anxious to
ingratiate themselves, to dissolve the tension generated by their
appointment, their role, their presence. It's all too easy, especially
in the absence of an adequately staffed CAET animation team. These
threats to our credibility as agents of evaluation must be anticipated and
resisted, and this brings us back to consideration of the locus of
judgement and the task of the external evaluator. It will surprise no-
one to hear that I take issue with those who would jeopardise their
credibility by blurring the distinction between evaluation and animation,
as well as with those who assume the right to pronounce judgement upon
the project. Neither of these polar interpretations of role seem to me
to offer the evaluator a defensible or even legitimate practice. Let me
state as succinctly as I can what I see to be the fairest and the most
useful stance for us to adopt, to declare, and to implement. In the
first place, we should disabuse the project of any notions that our
function is to adjudicate on their merits. We serve that need in others
who don't have the opportunity to gather the data of judgement for
themselves. We are agents of judgement, enablers, facilitators. We are
representers, modellers, samplers, collectors and summarisers of social
actions which others seek to understand, to judge, to learn from. Now,
of course, these responsibilities compel us to judge many things that
shape perceptions of worth; we have to select and order our data, decide
what to include and leave out, what gets passing attention and what

extended reportage. We are not pure channels, and so our aspiration to fairness and utility cannot be met simply by with-holding value conclusions from otherwise tendentious and value-laden accounts. We must seek to access the process of our agency to those whom we observe as much as we do to those whom we seek to inform. There are ways of doing this that will both make the discharge of our role less subject to distortion and more acceptable to the pilot projects.

1. By honouring their reasonable right to be represented in terms which fairly and adequately represent their experience and their efforts rather than in terms which under-represent their work in order to serve the convenience of others. I would call this putting the judgement before the judge. We too often excuse our reports on the grounds of responsiveness to audience constraints.

2. By giving space and prominence to their judgements, interpretations and explanations rather than to our own.

3. By open reporting, eschewing confidential or secret evaluation reports.

4. By negotiating our reports with those reported on, inviting and responding to criticism on the grounds of accuracy, fairness and relevance.

In such ways, and there are many others, we can defuse the understandable anxiety that projects entertain towards us, promote a co-operative relationship, but retain the credibility and, therefore, the utility of the external evaluator role.