

**MARK
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**Why Science Matters
to Government**

Introduction

**The geeks are coming.
And our world needs them.**

We live in a country where:
A writer can be forced into court for telling the scientific
truth.

The media would rather sell papers by scaremongering
about the MMR vaccine or GM crops than reporting the
facts.

A government advisor was sacked for a decision based on
science rather than public opinion.

Only one of our 650 MPs has ever worked as a research
scientist.

It is time to entrench scientific thinking more deeply into
politics and society. To fight for policy based on evidence.

What follows is a single chapter from Mark Henderson's
brilliant new book:

THE GEEK MANIFESTO: Why Science Matters.

POLICY-BASED EVIDENCE

Why science matters to government

THE EXPERT ADVISER, said the minister, had been abundantly clear. ‘What he said was that closing down special needs schools and putting needy kids into mainstream education is a lousy idea,’ said Hugh Abbott, the Secretary of State for Social Affairs and Citizenship.¹

Malcolm Tucker, the splenetic and foul-mouthed Downing Street press officer from *The Thick of It*, had other ideas. ‘Yeah, but I’ve got an expert who will deny that.’ Abbott protested: who was Tucker’s expert? ‘I have no idea, but I can get one by this afternoon. The thing is you have spoken to the wrong expert. You’ve got to ask the right expert. And you’ve got to know what an expert’s going to advise you before he advises you. Hugh, whether you like this or not, you are going to have to promote this Bill, so what I’m going to do is, I’m going to get you another expert, yeah?’

Politicians of all parties are addicted to evidence. They know that it is fundamental to grown-up and rigorous debate, and that without it their arguments will sound empty and groundless if they are lucky, opportunistic and self-serving if they are not. They want to appear pragmatic – committed, as Tony Blair used to put it, to the notion that ‘what matters is what works’. They thus portray themselves as champions of evidence-based policy, who always make decisions according to the very best expert advice.

This commitment, however, is skin-deep. For all their rhetoric about evidence-based policy, what most politicians really value is something rather different. They want evidence, for sure: they require it if they're going to make a halfway convincing case. But that evidence should support the policy they want to implement; they don't want inconvenient data that suggests their initiatives won't work.

Like Malcolm Tucker, what they want is not evidence-based policy, but policy-based evidence.

*What politicians want is not evidence-based policy,
but policy-based evidence*

When Gordon Brown's long wait to succeed Tony Blair finally came to an end in 2007, the new Prime Minister decided that one way to set him apart from his long-term rival would be to reverse the government's recent decision to reclassify cannabis as a class C drug.² This had been done only three years previously, on the recommendation of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), which considered that the evidence of harm was insufficient to warrant class B status and a maximum penalty for possession of five years in prison. The new occupant of No. 10 felt this had sent damaging signals that the drug was safe.⁸ His Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, ordered the ACMD to reconsider.³

The advisory panel agreed to take another look. But it refused to dance to the Prime Minister's tune. It found, as it had done in 2004, that the evidence supported the classification of cannabis in class C, and twenty of its twenty-three members voted against a change in the law.⁴ Sir Michael Rawlins, its chairman, said that reclassification 'is neither warranted, nor will it achieve its desired effect'.⁵