

When ministers are well primed

Enthusing and informing government members about science can have surprising and gratifying results.

Hans Wigzell

In 1999, I was appointed special scientific adviser to the Swedish prime minister and government, a position I still hold. A fortuitous lack of instructions meant I largely designed my own strategy for supporting the administration.

My aim was to educate and excite government members about science. The various schemes I introduced included ministers meeting with Nobel laureates and Sweden's best scientists, and retreats for the prime minister and minister of education with 10 selected researchers at a time. In these ways, I delivered more than 100 hours of top-quality science education to the prime minister between 1999 and 2006 and shared with members of the government my personal knowledge of some of the best Swedish scientists and science anecdotes for them to recount when needed.

During my time as special adviser I have learnt that day-to-day politics is often based on chance. The immediate availability of a trusted scientific adviser is essential in helping politicians to make decisions. When news broke about the cloning of Dolly the sheep, for example, I received an agitated phone call from Sweden's minister of education. He expressed his horror and was keen to respond rapidly to forbid human cloning. I asked him whether he had met any cloned people, to which he replied, "certainly not". Once I had explained that monozygotic twins are 'clones', he calmed down; no rushed announcement was made nor legislation introduced.

Of particular significance to Sweden was President George W. Bush's announcement on 9 August 2001 that only work on existing human embryonic stem-cell lines would be granted US federal funding. The National Institutes of Health helped the US government by declaring that more than 60 such cell lines were available globally. Roughly one-third of these lines were in Swedish laboratories — partly because Sweden had been a pioneer in developing *in vitro* fertilization technology. The Swedish media became excited: here was an opportunity for Sweden to produce medical research of great benefit to the country and mankind.

"Asked what a stem-cell line was, one minister said it looked like a Christmas tree with blunted twigs."

and boasted that his country housed two human embryonic stem-cell lines; his Swedish counterpart had proudly retorted, "we have 21".

The week after the Thursday session, Sweden's leading daily newspaper featured a full-page debate in which the ministers for education and health jointly proposed a permissive law for Sweden on stem-cell research. Eventually, this resulted in our country having some of



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The Swedish prime minister asked members of his government whether they knew what a stem-cell line actually was. One thought it was cells growing in a straight line, a second described a blob of cells and a third said it looked like a Christmas tree with blunted twigs. So the prime minister asked me to lecture the government for 20 minutes on human embryonic stem cells during their Thursday session. The presentation created quite a stir and stimulated many questions; I left an hour and a half later.

The events that followed verged on surreal. The minister of defence flew north and included embryonic stem cells in his talk to the military. Two weeks later, the minister of industry rushed up to me and relayed the one high point of an otherwise uneventful meeting in Brussels. A minister had leaned over to him during lunch

the most liberal legislation on stem-cell research in the world.

The mix of schemes that evolved from my original mission to enthuse and inform ministers about science has so far taken many an unexpected turn.

The Swedish government, while chairing the European Union in 2001, had an important meeting in Uppsala with the EU research ministers. It was agreed that some cultural event should also be included. I had been acting at Stockholm City Theatre since 1989 and had appeared — with three of Sweden's best actors — in a play concerning misconceptions about molecular biology. So the government asked me to stage a version of the piece, starring all the ministers.

The Swedish government was thus, in different ways, inspired to promote the founding of a European Research Council (ERC). It continued to support this proposal avidly through to the final 2005 agreement of the European Union.

It is amusing to think that George W. Bush may inadvertently have supported the creation of the most progressive law so far on human stem-cell research and assisted in forming the ERC. But that's politics for you.

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