

Wanted: a voice for the life sciences

Academic life scientists are currently well-funded, but they need to develop better advocacy skills in order to exert some influence over issues related to their work.

These are among the best of times for many in the life sciences, with strong government and industrial support helping to develop a burgeoning community which makes an important contribution to both scientific discovery and public life. During such times, it makes sense for the community to ensure that it speaks with a clear voice, not just in the corridors of power, but also in our broader society, where so many voices are striving to be heard. So it is unsurprising that biologists in both the United States and the United Kingdom (see pages 310, 315, this issue) are striving for more effective representation from their professional societies and related advocacy groups.

A similar set of issues concern these scientists on both sides of the Atlantic. Close to the top of their agenda is graduate education. There is a growing realization within the community that the attraction of young people into a lengthy period of very hard work for very little money, to be followed in most cases by gradual disillusionment as the prospect of a tenure-track position fades, is a sub-optimal approach to career development. Increasingly pervasive restrictions on the use of research tools and research data make up another area in which academics need to speak up, before their voice is overwhelmed by industrial interests. Scientific integrity, animal care, cloning and genetic engineering are all issues in which the community can help itself and the public by communicating a coherent and credible point of view.

In the United States, the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), which publicly represents 17 scientific societies, has emerged in recent years as an influential voice in public policy. But it competes for attention with rivals such as the 40,000-strong American Society for Microbiology and the American Institute of Biological Sciences, a federation representing whole-organism biologists.

This fragmentation is not ideal, but FASEB has nonetheless proven its influence, especially in campaigning for money for the National Institutes of Health. It makes sense that it should seek to extend this success into other spheres. In Washington, it is particularly important that the academic community make itself heard: unlike the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries, academics cannot afford to peddle influence by paying large sums of money to sympathetic politicians.

In the United Kingdom, a belief that scientific societies are failing to adequately represent life scientists has led to the foundation of a UK Life Sciences Committee, comprising representatives of 12 learned societies in the biosciences, which organized a meeting in London earlier this month on graduate education. The committee has identified a requirement — which it may itself duly fill — for a more broadly based organization to represent both academic and industrial science. It remains to be seen if the different interests of the two can be adequately reconciled.

Scientific societies with a longer tradition of high-level involvement in policy matters — such as the American Physical Society — have refined this craft to the point where their membership is clearly capable of punching its weight. The picture in biology is more complicated, with long-standing enmities (some of which can be traced to the sudden ascendancy of molecular biology in the 1960s, and the subsequent transformation of the field) serving to inhibit effective public advocacy. Umbrella groups such as FASEB and the UK Life Sciences Committee are constrained in what they can say by their need to consult with so many affiliates. The time is right for biologists to find a voice commensurate with their importance in society, but this may prove to be easier said than done. □

“Red-Green” warning signals

A change in Germany’s government could place some sensitive science issues on centre stage.

In the campaign for this Sunday’s federal election in Germany, the two main parties, Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s Christian Democrats (CDU) and Gerhard Schröder’s Social Democrats (SDP), have unsurprisingly chosen to focus their campaigns on unemployment, immigration and crime. The science policies of these parties are largely identical, and science issues will only come to the fore if the Green party forms part of the next government — the most likely outcome.

Some scientists are alarmed by this prospect. It would lead to little change in research policy itself: Schröder would be unlikely to hand over the research ministry to the Greens, as they wished. However, the junior coalition partner would probably be given the environment ministry: bad news for the biotechnology and nuclear industries.

As the Greens have edged closer to power they have shed some of their more uncompromising positions. Their election platform still calls for a complete ban on field trials of genetically modified crops, however, as well as a tightening of gene-related laws. When Joschka

Fischer, now leader of the Green party, became environment minister in Hessen in 1985, he managed to delay for years permission for Hoechst to open a plant making genetically engineered human insulin. He also closed Germany’s only plutonium reprocessing plant.

And recently, Rainer Steenblock, Green environment minister in SPD–Green Schleswig-Holstein, opposed planned field trials of genetically modified crops run by AgrEvo (*Nature* 394, 819; 1998).

As senior coalition partner, the SDP would oppose any move by a Green environment minister to outlaw such trials — but it would have to balance the strength of such opposition against any threat to the stability of the coalition government. A Green environment minister could also expedite the closure of nuclear power stations, with serious implications for German energy policy.

Science and technology issues may have got lost in the election campaign, but they will return to the fore if an SPD–Green government is the outcome. □