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Populism . . . elitism . . . or a middle way?

THE newly formed Science, Technology and Society Association started life with a suitably large splash last week in London by having Mr Tony Benn, UK Secretary of State for Energy and the association's president, talk on the democratic control of science and technology. The association has emerged from the SISCON (Science in a Social Context) project which, over the past few years, has brought together various groups in higher education in Britain interested in the broader issues of science. The plan now is to reach beyond the academic world and not just into other areas of education. Its first newsletter speaks of hoping to draw members from industrial managers, trade unionists, politicians, members of the public "to confront scientists with the implications of their researches", teachers and journalists. An unfortunate omission is mention of those very scientists and technologists whose work raises so many issues. And at the first meeting there was also a sad lack of those same scientists and technologists.

Mr Benn's not entirely unpredictable line was that the questions raised by developments in science and technology were too important to be the subject of closed discussion amongst an elite. He drew two examples, from the military world and the field of nuclear power. The disciplined hierarchy of the military, comparable with monastic orders, could have all sorts of influences of which the public were totally unaware; enormous expenditures in what was now a highly technological defence force were essentially secret. Again, nuclear power, regardless of the merits of those who have devoted their careers to it, raises the some problems of democratic control and tightfistedness over the flow of information. Mr Benn plans to postpone a decision on the commercial fast-breeder reactor for as long as possible, not because of doubts on the technological side but because, he claims, he is as yet not satisfied that the democratic machinery exists to bring out all relevant information.

One of the prices of high technology and high living standards, he pointed out, is a greater vulnerability of society to industrial disputes, technological and natural disasters and war. And as a consequence civil liberties can be eroded—we might find ourselves backing into a police state by means of high technology, and abandoning our values. We cannot, declared Mr Benn, discuss technology in isolation from the much neglected subject of societal values. And if we do not safeguard these values with democratic institutions we are in danger of trading liberties for colour television sets.

Mr Benn, of course, has great faith in the ballot box, in parliament and in fully informed ministers (not as managers so much as members of the public elected as it were to the board of directors). If the public, through elections, can have a voice in the country's social and economic policy, why not also in policy for science and technology?

It is possible to go a long way with Mr Benn's thinking on accountability, and yet to find the ballot box too facile a symbol of that accountability. As he himself admits, some do not vote for the government they believe to be most suitable but (for example) for the candidate who is for or against fluoridation. In all the complexity of motives for voting, and in all the manoeuvring a government does to try and ensure that it is re-elected, what hope that a stable policy for science and technology be central to anyone's thoughts? Yet without stability and rational policies, scientists and technologists who, more than almost any other sector of the community, can move in international circles will simply get up and go where the climate is more settled. And the idea of complex developments with necessarily vast ranges of uncertainty becoming an area of populist concern is bound to strike terror in the hearts of those patiently and quietly trying to accumulate the relevant knowledge.

But whilst we ought to be wary of a sort of free-ranging democracy which is alien to science itself, if the obverse is a return to monastic secrecy, that too must be resisted. Certainly scientists and technologists are a very different breed from politicians, and distrust is to be found on both sides of the fence. But somehow we as scientists have to raise our deplorably low political awareness just as we have to hope that more than a handful of politicians like Mr Benn will find they can move freely and happily within the world of science and technology. Here the Science, Technology and Society Association should have a major role to play. One of its objectives should be to incorporate into the educational system more courses which will make potential scientists and technologists think about public issues. At present it is too easy to become fully qualified without such a training. If this were to make for wiser, more mature judgement by us, the practitioners, and if at the same time an increased number of politicians were able to appreciate the issues in more than terms of short term gain, then science and technology policy, founded on rational dialogue, would benefit immeasurably. And that, presumably, is what Mr Benn would wish. □