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The voice of the people—which one?

ONE of the unmistakeable trends of the 1970s has been for the question of risk—its measurement, perception and acceptance—to move progressively away from being a purely technological problem and towards the centre of the political stage. Scientists and technologists may have been able to come up with numerical values and probabilities and indeed as a result of their work immense strides have been made in raising safety standards. But a never-ending succession of accidents, major and minor, continues to remind us that the risks of a technological world, be they from unsafe drugs, faulty nuclear reactors, wrecked supertankers or whatever, come largely from human and institutional frailty and not from imperfect materials or inappropriate differential equations. Small wonder then that risk is now a political issue.

Many scientists and technologists are bitter about the way apparently technical issues have been taken over by social scientists, bureaucrats and politicians. It would be wrong totally to dismiss this bitterness as professional narrow-minded jealousy without giving some thought to whether an embittered profession will attract the ablest young people to it. Nevertheless, the problematical nature of the interaction of humans with technology, as controller as well as potential sufferer inevitably means that wider circles of opinion are now being sounded out, and that even wider circles may have to be consulted in the future. But what exactly does public participation in the handling of technological risk questions mean? This was one of the important issues raised at a recent seminar in Berlin organised by the European Economic Community and the European Committee on Research and Development (CERD).

If decisions are not simply to be handed down from remote technocratic elites, responsible only to themselves, it is all but inevitable that there will be dissension, some of it vigorous. And as Dorothy Nelkin of Cornell put it, "resolving conflicts is much like seeking 100% risk-free technology—hardly a feasible goal". What has to be done is that all sides must see that their case is at least taken into account by whoever makes the decision, and they must be satisfied that the choice of decision-maker and the form of inquiry does not prejudge the case. Apparently harmless criteria—yet it was striking how many unsatisfactory cases could be cited where the decision was a foregone conclusion or where objectors found themselves seriously hindered.

That said, however, a striking theme to emerge from the seminar was that objectors to technological developments on grounds of unreasonable risk should be smoked out on what they really stand for. This, it was suggested, could be done in two ways. First, they should be asked whether they were aware of the consequences of saying no to particular projects, and had thought them through as carefully as they had thought through their objections. Second, many objectors to technological projects do so not because they disapprove of one particular proposal at one particular place, but because such projects go against their total sense of values. In the words of Jerry Ravetz of Leeds "we must recognise that we can no longer follow the politics of 'economism', where quantitative differences can be negotiated between opposing sides; rather we must accept some features of the politics of 'ethnicity', where deep differences of values must be confronted and then used for the mutual education of both sides".

It is clear that there is absolutely no agreement about just how widely views on risk should be canvassed. When three out of four drivers, given a chance, will spurn the use of a seat-belt for no apparent reason whatever, it is obvious that thinking by the man-in-the-street about risk-taking is immensely complex, not to say irrational. So how do we represent—indeed who represents—this man-in-the-street, and is this element of irrationality to be despised or to be allowed for? The problem is that we may be in danger of replacing a technological elite by yet another elite which thinks it knows what the public wants or ought to want. The long-term answer, and this should be regarded as a long-term problem not just here for a few years, must surely lie in much more effective education at all levels in thinking about technology and risk. Few technologists are taught to think about social matters. Few social scientists are taught to think about technology in depth. It is here that progress must be made.

The European Economic Community could feel pleased with this seminar. It is a subject peculiarly appropriate to the community. Individual nations cannot at present muster the resources to take an omnidirectional view of the subject. Yet each is having to cope with a set of broadly similar problems in its own distinctive way. What more valuable than to let these varying patterns rub off on each other under EEC auspices. □