

nature

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Who participates . . . and how?

SYDNEY BRENNER: The discussion goes that the public should know and the public should decide and the public should participate in all the decisions on what research should or should not be pursued. And we are told that these are not decisions for scientists to take alone in laboratories. What I should like to hear spelt out is: how does the public actually come to participate in these decisions? I mean, we're talking about experimental politics rather than experimental biology here.

ANTHONY QUINTON: There's a saying here, isn't there, *sagesse oblige*. The trouble is that the general public is not in a position to make any sort of decision at all until it is told a great deal by scientists. I think one might reasonably say the existing institutional machinery for the public dissemination of socially interesting or socially relevant scientific activity is rather rudimentary and haphazard and improvisatory.

On the other hand, I don't think I'd like

it to be the responsibility of a particular ministry, with civil servants putting in papers. It's just the sort of thing that a Quango might be rather good at doing, where you have a very substantial scientific representation, where scientists would come and talk about their work. A sort of conceptual, theoretical ombudsman in a way.

BBC Radio 3, reprinted in *The Listener*, 26 July 1979.

NIGEL FORMAN, one of the few Members of Parliament with a lively and continuing interest in science and technology, notes the demise of the Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology in this issue (page 443). With the disappearance of one valuable meeting point for scientists, administrators and 'the public', to be replaced by new department-orientated committees in which science is most unlikely to receive as consistent a hearing, it is reasonable to ask whether public understanding of science — or more particularly public understanding of the social issues raised by science — is unacceptably low, as might be inferred from Anthony Quinton's remarks.

What channels are there in Britain for keeping up the links? Obviously there are the printed and broadcast media, with quality ranging from very high to abysmal — but with, of course, relatively few opportunities for two-way communication. There is, sadly, no real British equivalent of the excellent serious American magazines able to devote substantial space to matters of public policy. There is the Royal Society, which has been trying, through its discussion meetings to introduce the occasional large scientific issue to a wide public — but which, too often, flounders on the uncompromisingly technical nature of its lecturers' contributions. There are the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science, the Royal Institution, the newly-formed Science and Technology Association, the Science Policy Foundation and the Council for Science and Society, each trying in distinctive ways to encourage scientists to think beyond the confining walls of their disciplines. There is the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, an informal meeting point for parliamentarians and top scientists and engineers. There is, of course, a quango already in existence — the Genetic Manipulation Advisory Group, comprised not just of experts but of representatives of the public interest. There is the British Association for the Advancement of Science struggling against formidable odds to inform a wider

public about science — including the social questions raised by science. And there is still some parliamentary select-committee activity, because the House of Lords keeps a rather effective eye on EEC science and environmental policy and may possibly broaden its interests in science and technology in response to the loss of the Commons committee.

But does all this activity add up to a scientific and technological community well aware of social issues? And does it produce a large pool of informed citizens capable of communicating easily with scientists and drawing them into debate on these issues? It does not. Part of the reason is undoubtedly that there are too many organisations covering the same sort of ground, looking to the same sources of financial support, calling on the same pool of people for their core support. But this is not the whole story. When scientists have gone out of their way in the past to discuss their work and its implications with intelligent non-scientists, they have too frequently found the response disappointing, both in terms of numbers who attend in the first place and those who are prepared to make the intellectual effort to stick with a subject after a first encounter.

So, with gloomy experiences in the recent past, there is a temptation to keep further efforts in the field to a low level and restricted to a limited number of people close to the interface. This would be a mistake. There is always scope for new initiatives, but they surely have to be done on a substantial scale and have enough long-term commitment that they do not capsize if one venture turns out to be a flop. The most obvious place in which to experiment is the Royal Society. It has adequate meeting rooms, a sizeable secretariat, connections in high places, easy access to a very wide range of scientists, prestige ... Regular, open meetings, not just in London, designed to bring scientists and non-scientists together are surely not beyond its capabilities and could play a major role in raising Britain's painfully low awareness of science. □