

Is there a spin doctor in the house?

A report on science and society provides a useful overview of recent controversies and ways of approaching them. More could have been said about improving researchers' anticipation of the media and lobbyists.

On the one hand, there has never been a time when issues involving science have been more exciting, the public more interested, or the opportunities more apparent. On the other hand, public confidence in scientific advice to government has been rocked by a series of events. So says the select committee on science and technology of the upper house of Britain's parliament, the House of Lords. The committee's report, *Science and Society*, published this week, addresses a crisis of public trust in the United Kingdom in a detailed fashion that should have strong resonances elsewhere.

The committee raises a wealth of suggestions on rebuilding this trust (see <http://www.parliament.uk>), urging funding bodies to reward scientists who communicate their findings to the public, the government to support websites giving links to reliable sources of scientific information, and the Public Understanding of Science movement to adopt a less patronizing title. The interplay between science and the media is one of the report's strongest points. That is a relief, because recent pronouncements from the Lords' counterparts in the House of Commons have been naive and unhelpful.

Last May, the Commons science and technology committee reviewed the recent hostile media coverage of genetically modified (GM) foods. It recommended that "media coverage of scientific matters should be governed by a Code of Practice which stipulates that scientific stories should be factually accurate". This suggestion mystified many, given that an existing Press Complaints Commission code requires accuracy in all reporting. It smacked of special pleading for science — hardly likely to regain the public's trust.

Sensibly, the Lords committee rejects this call. "Science cannot

expect special treatment from the media," says its report. "Scientists must indeed take the rough with the smooth, and learn to work with the media as they are." In any case, the report notes, factual accuracy isn't the main issue: "Much more significant . . . is the way in which the facts are used, both by writer and reader". In other words, 'spin'. The frenzy that gripped Britain last year was driven as much by public suspicion about the motives of large companies as by unease about biotechnology. The pressure groups that led the crusade against genetic modification recognized this, took some contentious results questioning the safety of GM food, and spun them for all they were worth. If scientific institutions are to respond effectively to such campaigns, they may need to hire their own spin doctors. Those in the firing line need better advice on how to present their arguments so that their own words aren't spun against them.

Good spin doctors would have deterred the government's chief scientific adviser from engaging in an ugly public row over GM coverage with the editor of a tabloid newspaper, as Sir Robert May did last year. They might also have warned the Royal Society about the way pressure groups would spin its criticism of Arpad Pusztai, the researcher whose unpublished findings sparked the GM scare. In addition to offering a scientific assessment of Pusztai's much publicized results, the society chastised him for talking to the media about research that hadn't been peer reviewed. Reasonable enough, but apply a little spin, and the story soon becomes "pro-GM scientific establishment gags whistleblower". The House of Lords committee says little about spin. But this is where important lessons from the GM experience can be learned if society's confidence in science is to be sustained. ■

A job half done

Spanish universities' need for research evaluation and competition is as strong as ever.

The newly re-elected Spanish government has greatly increased its majority. It would do well to focus on improving the assessment and related rewards for the country's universities. As a correspondent rightly suggests on page 222, a recent pioneering and bravely controversial evaluation of universities (see *Nature* 402, 848; 1999) left important questions unanswered, addressing teaching but doing a poor job in evaluating research. Unsurprisingly, low-scoring universities were the most critical whereas some of those with high scores were content to keep silent. Where next?

Will universities with a low score try to improve on their weak points, as listed in the study, in order to perform better in future and approach high-scoring universities? Probably not. The study held no consequences for the institutions it evaluated. Moreover, it has been attacked by public bodies responsible for assessing the quality of universities and also by rectors who got low scores, such as Saturnino de la Plaza, rector of the Polytechnic University of Madrid, who is also the

president of the influential Council of Rectors of the Spanish Universities. He says the council is to set up a commission that will evaluate the quality of universities but will not provide any type of ranking.

That approach will miss an important opportunity. Many countries rank universities or departments according to various measures of quality in research. Although Spanish students are being educated in an increasingly competitive system, open competition is still inadequate in important areas such as the recruitment of professors. Furthermore, a national evaluation committee is necessary to rank university departments on research and teaching, with more funding being awarded to the strongest. Research measures could include the volume and quality of publications and the number of patents. Moreover, to ensure a dynamic and competitive system, panels of foreign scientists should be invited to assess the quality of Spain's university research, as happens in Portugal. Such approaches are urgently required to help Spain deliver ever better teaching and research. ■