

UK civil servants accused of warping science

"Politicians twist science to suit policy" would be an unsurprising headline in the United States, given the rocky relationship between the Bush administration and the US science community. But the same message raised eyebrows on the other side of the Atlantic last week, when a UK parliament report suggested that politicians there also pick and choose scientific results that best suit their policies.

Britain's three successive Labour governments have made much of their desire to integrate research into policy-making; phrases such as "evidence-based policy" have become buzzwords for ministers. Science minister David Sainsbury, who left his position last week after eight years, also won the respect of researchers (see page 244). But the latest report from the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology tarnishes that happy image.

The cross-party group of 11 MPs takes ministers to task for labelling policies "evidence-based" when no relevant research exists, and criticizes the civil service for its poor interpretation of research results. Perhaps most worrying, concludes Phil Willis, the Liberal Democrat member who chairs the committee, is the fact that government-commissioned studies regularly go unpublished when they conflict with a department's policy.

The report's most dramatic examples came from Tim Hope, a criminologist at the

University of Keele, whom the Home Office commissioned to evaluate an initiative on reducing burglary. Hope told the committee that the Home Office ignored a result showing an increase in crime rates in one area, and focused solely on a second result that showed a drop in offences. The Home Office did not return *Nature's* request for comment.

Willis says that this and other examples — such as a 2005 anti-obesity drive developed in the absence of any evidence that it would work — show that the government lacks the academic ideal that all results must be aired, regardless of whether they fall as desired. "It's a level of scientific incompetence," he says. "There is not the culture of using scientific evidence and research in the way the scientific community would understand it."

The report recommends that the government should ensure that every department has its own chief science adviser, and should also establish a government scientific service charged with bringing scientists into government and securing proper career paths for them.

That is a laudable but old idea, notes Peter Cotgreave, director of the London-based lobby group the Campaign for Science and Engineering; a similar recommendation was made more than seven years ago, yet remains to be implemented. The government is likely to respond to the current proposals in the next few months.

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1 FOX/ANIMY

The report also suggests that peer review by outside bodies, such as learned societies, could assess the degree to which the government's policies are based on evidence. The government may, however, balk at the thought of having an outside body audit its performance. Some science-policy experts are also sceptical about the idea: "This would replace judgements currently being made by officials subject to democratic accountability with judgements made by those outside the process," points out Roger Pielke Jr of the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Whatever the difficulties in Britain, political interference in science policy is far greater in the United States, says Willis. For instance, it is widely thought that David King, the UK chief

Gunmen seize academics at Baghdad ministry

As *Nature* went to press, agencies were struggling to confirm details of what may be one of the worst mass kidnappings since the Iraq conflict began in March 2003. At around 9:30 a.m. local time on 14 November, gunmen are reported to have abducted up to 150 academics, staff and visitors from an office of the higher-education ministry in the Karrada area of Baghdad.

Little information on the institute targeted by the kidnappers was

available at the time of writing, although sources in Baghdad said that the centre involved is a branch of the ministry that helps students and professors obtain placements in overseas universities. Some of the staff would have had a scientific background. The identity of the kidnappers isn't known, but those taken include both Shia and Sunni Muslims. According to some reports, the higher-education minister, Abed Theyab, immediately ordered

the closure of all universities until security is improved.

The timing may have been chosen to coincide with the Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs, held 11–15 November in Cairo, Egypt, according to Abbas Al-Hussaini, a civil engineer at the University of Westminster, UK. Al-Hussaini is also general secretary of the Iraqi Higher Education Organising Committee in London, which was set up in January 2004

to help reconstruct Iraq's research and higher-education system.

The Pugwash organization, which campaigns against armed conflict, depends heavily on academics for its work in the Middle East, as well as other regions. Al-Hussaini believes that the kidnappings are not related to religious conflict between Sunnis and Shias, but are part of a plan to destabilize Iraq coordinated by former intelligence officials loyal to Saddam Hussein.



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Selective evidence: data on crime initiatives were ignored by the UK Home Office.

science adviser, would be able to speak out if government science policy diverged sharply from the evidence, whereas few would expect such independence of US presidential science adviser John Marburger. But during King's six years in office, government policy and scientific thinking on high-profile issues such as climate change have not diverged substantially. An interesting test of his independence, and the government's commitment to evidence-based policy, will occur when they do. ■

Jim Giles

German stem-cell law under fire

Germany's strict laws governing human embryonic stem (ES) cells are no longer appropriate and need to be relaxed, says the country's main funding agency, the DFG.

Backing its arguments with an 80-page report released on 10 November, the DFG argues that its previous support for a cautious approach is no longer valid.

When the DFG speaks, politicians listen, and a parliamentary debate is now likely. But federal research minister Annette Schavan, a Christian Democrat, swiftly rejected any fundamental change to the rules, which forbid German researchers from working on human ES cell lines created after January 2002. The penalty for doing so, either in or outside Germany, is up to three years in prison.

The DFG calls for three changes to the law. First, that the cut-off date be removed to give researchers access to the newer, better stem-cell lines used in other countries. Second, that human ES cell lines be allowed to be imported for clinical as well as research purposes. And third, that the threat of punishment for German researchers working abroad be lifted.

Despite Schavan's rejection of the recommendations, there are splits on the issue for the first time in both her party and its sister party, the Christian Socialists, with some members calling for the cut-off date to be abolished. The Social Democrat coalition partner and the opposition Free Democrats are also split.

In previous statements in 1999 and

2001, the DFG called for continuing public debate about the possible benefits and limitations of stem-cell research, and for further research into the potential of adult stem cells to provide an alternative source of cells capable of generating different types of tissue. Its current report acknowledges that the past five years of international research has not only cast doubt on the potential of

adult stem cells, but has also made clinical applications of human ES cells foreseeable. German researchers are being left behind, the report says, and isolated further by a reluctance abroad to include German researchers on international stem-cell committees for fear they may be prosecuted at home.

The outcome of the debate is uncertain, but politicians are broadly supportive of

decriminalizing research on human ES cells by German scientists in countries where it is allowed.

Responding to the DFG's report, Schavan also promised to launch "in the near future" a research programme for alternatives to human ES cells. But this just annoyed researchers more. "This top-down attempt to provide alternatives has been the ministry's line since the beginning, and has been shown not to work," says Oliver Brüstle, head of the Institute for Reconstructive Neurobiology at the University of Bonn, one of the DFG report's 12 authors. "It will be extremely dangerous to ignore international developments," he warns. ■

Alison Abbott



Annette Schavan is against changing Germany's rules.

MAHMOUD BAOUF MAHMOUD/REUTERS



Security has been tightened at Iraq's higher-education ministry.

If the details are confirmed, the abduction will be the biggest single event in a steady campaign of

attacks and assassinations against Iraqi academics during the bloody aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall. More than 200 are thought to have been killed, and hundreds more have fled the country (see *Nature* 441, 1036-1037; 2006).

Lack of investigation and prosecutions means that little is known about who carries out such attacks, and the motives are thought to vary. Some victims have certainly been targeted in revenge for past political allegiances, but many believe that there is also an organized campaign to eliminate

intellectuals, as part of an attempt to make the country ungovernable.

"Terrorist forces are out to scare the scientific community," Al-Hussaini told *Nature* earlier this year. He believes that academics are targeted because they enjoy "much greater prestige and status than in the West, and could transform Iraq into a modern society".

Scientific and human-rights organizations, including Scholars at Risk, the International Council for Science and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, have called for

assassinations and attacks to be better investigated, for security to be boosted at universities, and for those most at risk to be given asylum at universities abroad.

But the killings continue. Among the most recent murders was that of Essam al-Rawi, a geologist and president of the University Professors' Union, who was shot dead on 30 October. A few days later, gunmen killed Jassim al-Asadi, a dean of the University of Baghdad, along with his wife and son. ■

Jim Giles and Declan Butler