

“should take place alongside the continued application of controls on cattle.” This report was made public on 22 October.

Last week, King was rightly criticized by scientists and members of parliament for seeming to go back on the ISG’s advice, which the government had itself sought. Badger culling is a politically fraught issue in Britain, pitching farmers against the equally passionate and vocal animal-protection lobby. King’s motives remain unknown but his actions are likely to encourage speculation that his report was written to please the farmers.

In many instances, it is likely that political factors will ultimately overrule scientific ones when a government takes a decision in a contentious field. If this is the case, then surely it would be better not to seek independent scientific advice that will inevitably be ignored. There are countless examples — the planned replacement of the Trident nuclear submarine arsenal, for instance — in which the UK government had no intention of taking independent advice, and so had the good manners not to ask for it.

In the United States, researchers are accustomed to treating the process that feeds scientific advice into the government with some suspicion. The latest incident, in which presidential science adviser John Marburger stands accused of interfering with testimony on climate change and public health first submitted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, merely reinforces this atmosphere (see page 8).

But in Britain, scientists have enjoyed a better relationship with their government and — prior to the badgers episode — little evidence has come to light of advisory recommendations from scientists being cooked or spun to match the government’s intentions.

On 24 October, Bourne and King were called to account for what had happened at a meeting of the House of Commons select committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Bourne was visibly annoyed, and described King’s report as “hastily written” and “superficial”. Rosie Woodroffe, an expert on conservation biology at the University of California, Davis, and an ISG member, said that the King report was riddled with “small mistakes”. In those circumstances, King’s insistence that “the conclusions in my report are not very different from those that the ISG reached” ring hollow.

It would be a good idea if the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which is now responsible for the matter, based its policy on the unfettered advice offered by Bourne’s committee. This would be deeply appreciated not just by the badgers, but by scientists in all spheres who choose to participate in painstaking advisory processes in the earnest belief that their advice will actually make a difference to government policy. ■

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Because it's there

An Asian Moon race is neither particularly worrying nor especially inspiring.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States and Soviet Union mounted dozens of missions to the Moon, orbiting it, crashing into it and landing softly on it. They even went so far as to return samples from it, either with a little help from some humans on hand or, in the Soviet case, without. Subsequently, neither spacefaring power touched the place for almost 20 years. In part this is because their race, such as it was, had ended. It was also because planetary scientists were far more interested in exploring other places. The Moon had a distinct been-there-done-that aura.

But for aspiring nations that have neither been there nor done that, the Moon has a great advantage over other objects of celestial study. Although only moderately interesting, it is very close and relatively easy to reach. So in 2003 it was the obvious target for Europe’s SMART-1 mission, which tested a new sort of rocket propulsion. And it is currently the destination of choice for others seeking to develop their spacefaring prowess.

In September, Japan finally followed a very small lunar mission launched in the 1990s, Hiten, with a much larger and more ambitious one, SELENE. October saw the launch of Chang’e-1 from China (see page 12), timed to coincide with the ‘re-election’ of Hu Jintao as leader of the Communist Party — a piece of celestial theatrics well in tune with the spirit of technocratic command and control that characterized the original Moon race. Next year will see the launch of India’s

Chandrayaan-1 and America’s Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, the heavyweight of the current crop.

It is easy to exaggerate the extent to which this constitutes a new Moon race. National rivalries and prestige definitely play a part in some of these programmes: China’s, in particular, is both touted by the government and appreciated by the population as evidence of national accomplishment and ambition. But the idea sometimes floated that this activity reflects a new perception of some sort of value in the Moon itself is wide of the mark.

Although there are interesting scientific questions about the Moon, few, if any, are of the first order. And despite some hype to the contrary, the Moon’s potential as a source of raw materials for Earth’s consumers is ludicrously constrained. There is nothing there worth the cost of bringing back to Earth (not even helium-3, a fuel of unknown utility to a second or third generation of fusion reactors of unknown feasibility). The Moon’s potential as a resupply station for spacefarers visiting other places is also poor, although perhaps not entirely negligible.

That doesn’t mean that the current spate of missions to the Moon is worthless. One learns by trying, and the Moon is a good test bed for mastering the arts of planetary exploration. The same applies, further down the line, to the far more resource-intensive business of sending humans; if you feel you must send humans elsewhere, it is a conveniently near at hand and well-characterized destination.

But the only prize to be won in any race that ends with humans yet again walking on the Moon is global recognition that you have managed to do what was accomplished to little lasting effect back in the days of flower power. It remains unclear that such recognition is worth the already stretched resources of India or China — or of any other nation. ■