
A. MORIN

If you want to win the game, you must join in

When governments ignore scientific advice, it is often because researchers do not engage with the political process, says **Rees Kassen**.

Scientists tend to blame poor policy decisions on a scientifically illiterate or uninterested political class and a media that oversimplifies ideas or sensationalizes controversy. There is no doubt a nugget of truth here. In the current Canadian parliament, just 17 of 308 MPs hold a first degree in the natural sciences, engineering or health sciences. If parliament reflected national university graduation rates in these fields, there would be 98.

Still, researchers must recognize that poor scientific decisions in politics do not necessarily result from a lack of understanding. They are, rather, a failure of scientists to communicate their message effectively in what is ultimately a political, not a scientific, arena.

I can almost hear the pings of e-mails filling my inbox with counter-examples. The most obvious is taking place right now in South Africa, where we see the continuing reluctance of governments worldwide to deal with climate change, despite the overwhelming evidence. Others will cite the discussions over the proposed pipeline linking the oil sands in Alberta to refineries in Texas, or the teaching of intelligent-design creationism alongside evolution in US high-school science classes — all evidence that science is not getting a fair hearing in policy debates.

Most politicians are not economists, yet in the battle for decision-makers' attention, economists have a history of winning. Perhaps this is because scientists are simply not interested in engaging in the to and fro of politics. Or perhaps it is because we prefer our advice to be accurate and comprehensive, rather than straight to the point and persuasive. Or maybe it is because scientists bear a heavier burden in the public eye for getting things wrong, as the mistakes of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change a couple of years ago seem to suggest.

A former top bureaucrat in the Canadian civil service once gave me the political perspective on this divide: scientists, he said, think too highly of their own view of the world and fail to appreciate the complex, multifarious nature of decision making. Our mistake is to think that science will be given a privileged voice on an issue. This is almost always wrong. From a politician's point of view, science is an interest group like any other.

Certainly, in my experience chairing the Partnership Group for Science and Engineering (PAGSE) — an association of science and engineering societies that conveys the research community's consensus opinion to the Canadian federal government — I have come across a number of situations in which it is the scientists, not the politicians, who have fallen short.

I oversee initiatives designed to engage parliamentarians in discussions on scientific research. One of the most important is testifying before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance, which makes recommendations on budget spending to the cabinet. Other activities include our 'Bacon and Eggheads' programme, a breakfast seminar series where top-flight researchers address parliamentarians, their staff, the media and bureaucrats.

PAGSE has had an impact. Although one can rarely be sure what has influenced the inner workings of government decisions, many of its recommendations have at least been in tune with recent actions. Last year, for example, saw the creation of a prestigious, internationally competitive postdoctoral fellowship programme. This was a suggestion that came, in part, from PAGSE.

The relationship is not always so smooth. Last year, a federal minister became interested in the idea of a national biodiversity survey, something biologists had been working towards for some time. When he asked for input, the biological community responded with multiple briefs, some of which undermined one another. Such disagreement offers a perfect excuse not to act, even if the goodwill is there. That is exactly what happened.

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Here are three suggestions to build greater trust between scientists and politicians.

First, improve the lines of communication. Opportunities for graduate students and scientists to carry out internships and secondments in a political environment, such as the Congressional Fellows programme run by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, are a start in this direction.

Second, we need scientists to stand for election to public office. Having more people on the inside of the political process who are, or have been, professional scientists should go a long way to increasing understanding among their political colleagues. It also builds trust in the scientific community for the political process.

Third, scientists need to seek opportunities to engage with politicians directly. One possibility, suggested to me once by a senator in the Canadian parliament, is for scientists to volunteer during election time to work in a candidate's office.

The aim must be to increase the receptivity of the political class to science, so that when the time comes to make decisions, science gets at least a fair hearing. This takes time. But, as the saying goes, we get the government we deserve. If, as scientists, we choose not to engage, then we will have only ourselves to blame. ■

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