/COMMENTARY

Do World Leaders Have Adequate Access to Scientific Information?

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Years ago, when I was editor of the weekly magazine *New Scientist*, I had a great idea. We would select several controversial topics that were in the news—for example, the idea that acid rain, exported westward from Britain, was damaging forests on the continent of Europe. We would then present the story in three parts—a core of hard factual evidence, followed by interpretations of these data from two authoritative commentators who held radically different views of their significance.

But it was *not* a great idea. Practically speaking, it was a disastrous one. For the strategy to work, the protagonists each had to accept the central "facts," and disagree only over their implications. However, as soon as we started to exchange potential core material, the very idea of agreement on anything at all began to disappear. First, one commentator rejected a crucial set of findings because they had not appeared in a sufficiently prestigious journal. Next, his opponent questioned the reliability of a method used in another paper to determine sulphur dioxide levels. There were disagreements about the comparability of analytical results in different countries, and about the relative importance of field work and experimental studies. Doubts were cast on the objectivity of particular reports, and even (in one case) on the sanity of their authors.

It soon became clear that, instead of clarifying for our readers both the issues and the nature of honest professional disagreements, the protagonists were moving further away than ever. So the trio of articles on acid rain never appeared in print. Neither, for the same reasons, did those we hoped to run on animal experimentation or on the relationship between diet and coronary heart disease. A few months after dreaming up the series, we abandoned the project.

That experience came to mind recently as I was reading a paper in *Science and Public Policy* (**22**:162, 1995) by Gordon Lake, a member of the Secretariat serving the European Parliament's committee on research, technological development, and energy in Luxembourg. Lake is rightly concerned about the inadequacy of scientific information and expertise available to members of many national parliaments in Europe and elsewhere, which is essential if they are to question the advice they receive from the executive arms of their governments. He outlines ways of repairing that deficiency, but in doing so suggests that purely factual material should be separated from the broader interrelationships between science and society.

There is, writes Lake, "an important distinction between the provision of scientific and technical information, perhaps via rapid responses to parliamentary requests for succinct briefings, and more long-term policy analysis of issues with a considerable scientific and/or technological dimension." He later rejects the idea that scientific elements can be dissected out of a dispute and can be resolved by the traditional methods of science, leaving political/value disagreements to be settled through political channels. Lake argues that the realities of conflicts between technical experts do not bode well for neat divisions of this sort, which were behind the proposals (recently revived in France) for "science courts" in the U.S. in the 1970s.

Yet the impossibility of distinguishing "facts" from policy and politics does not rest easily with the distinction he wishes to make. Take four of his examples: bovine somatotropin (BST), food safety, AIDS research priorities, and bovine spongiform enchephalopathy (BSE). It is just as hard, in any of these instances, to discern virtually anything that would qualify as a pure "fact," separable from political judgment, as it is to resolve any such facts from policy analysis. And when Lake recommends that analysis and information provision, even when represented within the same technology assessment office, should be separately staffed, I demur.

True, some national assemblies do maintain a division between information (often a library responsibility) and policy or technology assessment. Is this really such a good idea? Are parliamentarians well served when requests for the latest thinking on, say, BST or BSE and their economic significance are likely to be met with very different responses from the two different quarters? Is it not the responsibility of someone working in either domain to portray the same evidence, with the honest assessment of its significance and of its future implications? ///