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The elephant in the room we can't ignore

If Donald Trump were to trigger a crisis in Western democracy, scientists would need to look at their part in its downfall, says **Colin Macilwain**.

The annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Washington DC last month was one of the best I've witnessed in more than 20 years of regular attendance. The policy sessions were packed and genuinely stimulating. I met tons of smart, influential people I hadn't seen for ages, and we all enjoyed a good chinwag about how better to engage with the public — the meeting's theme for 2016.

The only trouble was what was going on outside the hotel — in the United States and the world at large.

In fact, the AAAS meeting took place in a sort of semi-conscious never-never land. The science-policy crowd talked a great game even as the pillars of the republic crashed noisily down around their heads.

Supporters or representatives of Donald Trump, the likely Republican nominee for this November's US presidential election, his extremely conservative rival Ted Cruz, or even Bernie Sanders, the Democrat insurgent, were simply not involved in these discussions. They never are. Senior scientists are instead inextricably linked to the centrist, free-market political establishment that has tended to rule, but which is now falling dangerously from public favour.

It is not just in the United States that this consensus — and perhaps democracy itself — is in danger. Poland has just elected a reactionary government that is clamping down on press freedom; France is toying with electing far-right politician Marine Le Pen to the presidency; and the rest of the world's elected leaders are each threatened, to a greater or lesser extent, by economic and migration crises. Populist nationalism is on the march again — exemplified by the rise of Trump, whose mode of operation does not countenance the opinions, advice or goodwill of anybody else.

Not for nothing are people being urged to read *Rubicon: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Roman Republic*, Tom Holland's summary of how Rome fell. The establishment — with which science has habitually enjoyed a genial, if subservient relationship — is on the rocks.

Many laboratory researchers perceive this, I fear, to be someone else's problem. But it isn't. If the West is really in its decline-and-fall stage, its Caligula stage, its Donald Trump stage, then this isn't just an issue for political and financial elites. It's also a problem for the 'experts' who crawl around after these elites, massaging their egos and defending their interests.

The playwright Bertolt Brecht had a good line on expertise. In his plays, doctors, lawyers and other 'experts' are generally portrayed in threes. They squabble haplessly among themselves, each manoeuvring into the position that most elevates themselves in the eyes of their aristocratic paymaster.

And that, sadly, is the role to which senior scientific leaders have sometimes reduced themselves. In the main, they have been happy to accept the autocracy of politics and finance, even, like the president of the European Research Council, hanging around at the annual meeting of business leaders at Davos in Switzerland, hoping to pick up crumbs from the rich man's table.

The problem extends down into the community itself. We like to talk about 'engaging the public', but many scientists really just want to talk at them. And too many ordinary scientists hold politicians in utter intellectual contempt — even though it is the scientists who have chosen a career that allows them to pursue relatively simple problems (such as building a machine to detect gravitational waves) rather than genuinely difficult ones (such as running a social-care programme in a small town).

And those senior scientists who do engage with the government or public — as scientific advisers, for example — often take up highly political positions without acknowledging that they are doing so. For example, they support free-trade agreements that cede the right of democratic governments to control things such as cigarette advertising or pesticide use without hard, scientific evidence. This is a political position that is pursued with great dedication by global corporations — and that is haplessly bought into by many scientists without a thought for its consequences.

I admit that it is difficult to bring more subtle and varied political approaches to the table. Groups of researchers that have tried to do so — such as the Federation of American Scientists and Union of Concerned Scientists

— have struggled to gain traction. Still, there is a fresher, grass-roots movement, exemplified by local 'sceptics' groups, through which younger scientists are trying to make their work relate to society's wider concerns.

But at the top, there is paralysis: leading scientific organizations do little except chase money and reinforce the ruling nexus of politics and finance — even since the financial crisis of 2008, which discredited the free-market philosophy that underpins that nexus. I argued years ago (see *Nature* 479, 447; 2011) that scientific leaders had failed to respond in any meaningful way to that collapse, and I'm still waiting.

The political structure of the West is in deep trouble, and should it fall apart, there will be plenty of blame to go around. Most will go to political and financial elites, or to rowdy mobs. But some will belong to people in the middle who have taken public funds, defended elites and then stood back and watched as democracy got ridden over a cliff. ■

Colin Macilwain writes on science and policy from Edinburgh, UK.
e-mail: cfmworldview@googlemail.com

POPULIST NATIONALISM IS ON THE MARCH AGAIN — EXEMPLIFIED BY THE RISE OF TRUMP.

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