



vetenskap & allmänhet

Science and politics – How can we bridge the gap?

Far too rarely do politicians talk directly to researchers. What prevents them? And how can the dialogue be improved? These questions were vigorously discussed by distinguished members of both professions at an interactive seminar during ESOF2008.

International research indicates that there are few meetings and too little communication between politicians and scientists. An open society needs more dialogue to ensure healthy political processes. But how can we make this happen? That was the theme of a round table seminar, arranged by the Swedish association Vetenskap & Allmänhet (VA) in co-operation with the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) as part of the large, cross-disciplinary event EuroScience Open Forum, ESOF 2008 (www.esof2008.org) in Barcelona, Spain.

Karin Hermansson, Research Director at VA, started by highlighting a few results from a Swedish survey of politicians' views of science and researchers. The main conclusions were that politicians need more opportunities to meet with researchers and that relevant research information should be easy to find, understand and interpret. Politicians would also like researchers to take a more active part in the societal debate.

These findings and the questions raised were illuminated by a number of short presentations and in group discussions among the more than 130 participants, seated at round tables.

Dr Ashok Kumar, British MP, declared that out of 646 MPs in the UK Parliament, only 80 have a scientific degree. Therefore, they need access to easy-to-understand scientific advice. For this purpose, POST – Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology – was established some 20 years ago to provide impartial information but leave

the politicians to make the decisions. Parliamentary committees carrying out detailed inquiries provide another source of scientific information.

Ulla Burchardt, German MP, described the challenges facing parliamentarians when using scientific information in the decision-making process. Scientific expertise and knowledge is certainly required to understand causes and effects on society, the economy and ecology. In Germany, the Büro für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung (TAB) produces reports aimed at stimulating debate and feeding into the parliamentary process.

“The aim is for parliamentarians and scientists to work side by side to reach a unanimous decision,” Ulla Burchardt explained.

“Scientists lobby for vested interests but the community is fragmented,” stated Professor **Enric Banda**, President of EuroScience. Scientists have no tradition of teamwork to bridge the gaps between disciplines.

“They should start reorganising themselves in a revolutionary way” he exclaimed.

Gerhard Schöny, a university student from Vienna, Austria, criticised politicians for being motivated primarily by financial reasons without giving due consideration to the wider implications.

Ulla Burchardt responded by saying that politicians need to find a balance among many factors and also to take their electoral community with them.

Gerhard Schöny mentioned climate change as an example of an issue where there is an urgent need for a better





understanding between scientists and politicians, but also for a greater interaction by researchers in society at large, explaining the consequences and the personal responsibility of citizens.

“Non-governmental organisations are the most effective lobby groups in the European Parliament,” **Jorgo Chatzimarkakis**, Member of the European Parliament, commented. He stressed that industry lobby groups are threatening to move enterprises to China or the US because of the ambitious European climate change policies.

“The important thing is to find global solutions and not only consider the European context,” Gerhard Schöny replied.

Paul Rübzig, Member of the European Parliament, also underlined the fact that many issues have to be tackled at a global rather than a European level.

A key issue identified during the round table discussions was helping politicians make sound decisions where social responsibility is concerned. MPs must take a balanced view of scientific information with respect to risk. Another issue raised was whether or not

everyone is biased in some way.

“One person’s pressure group is another’s voice of reason,” was the comment from one table.

Björn von Sydow, MP and former Speaker of the Swedish Parliament, saw a need for more competition and debate between politicians on scientific issues.

“You cannot deliberately organise conflict, but should not always try to avoid it.”

Malcolm Harbour, Member of the European Parliament, added:

“Politicians need to hear about disagreements and conflict between scientists.”

He also questioned whether it should be regarded a success if all projects funded by the European Research Council turned out to be fully successful.

“Wouldn’t that mean that ERC has not been ambitious enough in selecting challenging projects with potentially big pay-offs?”

Jorgo Chatzimarkakis said that his fellow members of the European Parliament found it hard to engage in science. In his view the media representation of

science is a major problem caused in part by inexperienced journalists. He stated that scientific journalism is often excellent but was critical of the media quality in general:

“They just want to write about sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll!”

David Dickson, journalist and editor of SciDevNet, (www.scidev.net) highlighted the different languages used by scientists and politicians:

“Politicians speak the language of power, scientists the language of knowledge, and there is a need for intermediary institutions to translate. The media is one such intermediary, providing information about what happens in science, representing the scientific lobby, being a channel for dialogue and acting as a public watchdog,” he said.

Some participants also stressed the fact that scientists are themselves influenced by the general media.

Al Teich, Director of Science & Policy Programs at AAAS, reflected on the differences between Europe and the US. There are few scientists in US politics, but they have a disproportionate influence on scientific affairs.

“Sometimes scientific influence can be outweighed by other lobbies. In addition, the Democrats generally take a view more consistent with the scientific consensus, whereas the Republicans more often are at odds with the scientific community.”

Professor David Cope of POST noted that, unlike the US situation where funding for the Office of Technology Assessment was discontinued, the trend in Europe is to develop more such parliamentary organisations. He mentioned that the most recent one is in Sweden.

“In order to catch politicians’ attention, it is useful to make the science message ‘easy,’” he said, adding the value of international comparisons, explaining consequences, providing evidence and making use of scenarios. The timing is also important. A message can be delivered too soon, before the politicians know they should be interested in a particular area.

An idea proposed during the discussions was that retired scientists should take positions as communicators. This has been the case in India recently and has had a significant influence on public opinion and policies.

There is also a need for scientists to better understand politics. The AAAS Congressional Fellowship Programme aims to bring scientists into the US congress in order to learn about the political environment and to share their expertise. So far, about 2,000 fellows have joined the programme.



The moderators **Camilla Modéer**, Secretary General of VA, and Dr **Carl Johan Sundberg** of Karolinska Institute and initiator of ESOF, invited the speakers to share their single best piece of advice on how to improve relations between politicians and researchers.

Jorgo Chatzimarkakis: There needs to be a great deal more trust and confidence between scientists and politicians.

Paul Rübzig: More competition in research and between disciplines is essential in order to build opinion.

Malcolm Harbour: The idea of having some kind of ‘rapid response team’ may be a way to pass information between scientists to politicians and vice versa.

David Dickson: Scientists need to act

with more humility and to be able to justify and communicate their research to others. Equally, politicians and journalists need to listen more to scientists.

David Cope: One of the best motivators for stimulating scientists and politicians to talk to each other is being in a crisis situation.

Björn von Sydow: Politicians are facing a more highly educated public. Science should be an important part of high school education.

Ashok Kumar: Scientists should participate more in democracy and politicians should listen to them.

Gerhard Schöny: It is important not to exclude the majority of the population who may be less well educated. Don’t forget about the young people – integrate them!



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Vetenskap & Allmänhet, VA (Public and Science), is a Swedish association aimed at promoting dialogue and openness between the public – especially the young – and researchers. It endeavours to stimulate greater dialogue around issues that concern people, and to connect these issues to science. VA is based on the broad involvement of organisations, public authorities and institutions, labour confederations, companies, private associations, religious groups and private individuals from across Swedish society. Everyone is welcome to join VA, which is a non-profit association. VA’s activities are supported by the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research, with financing from membership fees and project grants.

Website: www.v-a.se