

POLITICIZING SCIENCE; SCIENTIZING POLITICS

In spite of the media treatment of them, there is nothing that is surprising about the now famous climategate emails. Surprise could only come from a misunderstanding of the relationship between science, policy and politics. Of course the emails reveal that the climate scientists were affected by policy and political considerations. They had to be. Science, policy and politics cannot be separated: they are inextricably intertwined. What is surprising is how much our public discourse is still dominated by the quaint Utopian view that science and policy can be strictly separated.

Scholars of science in policy have long ago shown that you can't take policy out of science. As Harvard's Sheila Jasanoff has concluded, "Studies of scientific advising leave in tatters the notion that it is possible, in practice, to restrict the advisory practice to technical issues or that the subjective values of scientists are irrelevant to decision making." This is especially true in public policy issues such as climate change where much of the science is complex and uncertain.

How safe are genetically engineered foods? What is the best way to store long term high level nuclear waste? How safe is PBA in water bottles? Should phthalates be banned from plastic toys? These are some of the recent public policy questions with which I have been closely involved as a practitioner of the regulatory craft over the past 35 years. In all these cases science is relevant but not determinative. And yet in all these cases the parties argued that the basic question was one of science: if only we could get the science right, the public policy answer would follow. If only the world were that simple.

And in all of these cases we have what Henrik and Jamieson have described: "The imprimatur of science being smuggled into deliberations that actually deal with

values and politics.”

In spite of all the confusing and contradictory theories of risk analysis, or perhaps because of them, a surprising number of academics and many regulatory scientists continue to believe or pretend to believe that science-based risk assessments and modelling are free of policy considerations. As Covello and Merkhofer have concluded: “In practice, assumptions that have potential policy implications enter into risk assessment at virtually every stage of the process. The idea of a risk assessment that is free, or nearly free, of policy considerations is beyond the realm of possibility.”

That scientists should dress up their science advice as pure “neutral” science is understandable. As Roger Paelkhe has pointed out, “For those with scientific expertise, it consequently makes perfect sense to wage political battles through science because it necessarily confers to scientists a privileged position in political debate.”

When the climate change sceptics reacted with glee that IPCC scientists had been “caught out” just before Copenhagen, the reaction of many of the IPCC scientists was instructive. They took great umbrage that the sceptics, driven in their view by purely ideological considerations, could suggest that they had some political agenda. Is it possible that some of them still believe in the old anachronistic notion – long the received wisdom – that comprehensive methodologies have been deliberately put in place to ensure that scientists are unaffected by values, that they are above such things as policy and politics? Are they unaware that they have been politicizing their science from the outset? The original UN mandate of the IPCC was to provide “policy neutral” guidance to the world’s policymakers. But from the beginning the IPCC scientists have been using their “privileged” position to advance a clear

political agenda.

But, again, they had no choice. Just as you cannot clearly separate science and policy, they could not separate their task to develop objective “neutral” science from providing policy advice. Their mandate was inherently flawed from the outset by a basic conflict of interest. This is not to say that the IPCC scientific consensus may not turn out to be sound. It seems to me that their credibility, ironically, would be enhanced if, instead of denying the role policy plays in their work, they made these considerations more explicit.

When I was President of Canada’s largest science-based regulator, I was regularly confronted by scientists who resented that senior officials and Ministers would dare to weigh their policy advice with social, economic, ethical and political policy considerations. Often they were seemingly unaware how much their science advice was imbued with unstated policy considerations, even if steps had been taken to mitigate the influence of these factors. This fall I taught a law and policy course to a group of graduate students in science at a leading Canadian university. These students seemed genuinely unaware, uncomfortable even, with the idea that science-based health risk assessments were replete with policy considerations. Perhaps the climategate emails have done us all a favour by revealing so clearly how much we need to engender a broad debate about the role of science and scientists in policymaking. We need to better understand how policy is scientized and science is politicized.

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