

EDITORIAL

Political interference in American science

Why Europe should be concerned about the actions of the Bush administration

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In a world of unprecedented complexity, where the public are confronted almost daily with ‘experts’ arguing about the meaning of scientific evidence on topics like health and the environment, there is a compelling need for mechanisms by which those who are not experts on a topic can obtain information on the issues that affect our wellbeing, confident that those providing this information are truly knowledgeable in their field, that they are acting impartially, and that all legitimate views on a topic have been heard.¹ In the United States a number of federal agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Food and Drug Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have provided such information. Their reputations for scientific excellence, built up over many years and across many Presidential Administrations, are now being undermined.² As a report prepared by the US House of Representatives reveals, there is growing evidence of political interference in the scientific information they provide to the general public and the scientific community.³ This report, prepared at the request of Representative Henry Waxman, of California, provides an alarming catalogue of overt political interference in American science. It draws examples from over twenty scientific issues, many relating to health, such as sex education, climate change, and pharmaceutical policy, but also including defence (e.g. national missile defence) and the environment (e.g. protection of fragile ecosystems).

The topics on health and environment fall into two categories; those such as abortion, stem-cell research or abstinence that have active religious right wing constituencies that support President Bush, or issues such as global warming or environmental protection that have significant economic consequences for his corporate supporters.

The report identifies three broad strategies that the Bush Administration has employed. The first is the manipulation of scientific committees. The legal requirement that federal committees should be ‘fairly balanced in terms of the points of view represented’ and ‘not be

inappropriately influenced by the appointing authority or by any special interest’⁴ has been disregarded. Established independent scientists have been sidelined in favour of those linked to vested interests. For example, when appointing members of a CDC committee on the effects of lead exposure on children, three highly qualified independent experts were rejected in favour of others with long-standing industry links, including one whose sole relevant research was on rats and who argued, contrary to long-established scientific consensus, that levels up to seven times those currently permitted were safe.^{5,6} The appointment of new members of the Advisory Committee to the National Center for Environmental Health that have strong links to industry prompted leading American Scientists to write that ‘stacking these public committees out of fear that they may offer advice that conflicts with administration policies devalues the entire federal advisory committee structure’.⁷

Some other appointments were made for ideological reasons, such as that of an individual now advising the Food and Drug Administration on reproductive health drugs who emphasises prayer and bible reading in the management of premenstrual syndromes⁸ or the appointment to CDC’s Advisory Committee of an advocate of abstinence-only policies on sex education whose credibility had previously been questioned by President Bush when governor of Texas.³ A candidate subsequently rejected for the National Advisory Council on Drug Abuse was asked about his views on abortion, the death penalty, and how he had voted, by an official from the Department for Health and Human Services.⁹

The administration has also blocked the appointment to international bodies of Americans who disagree with it, as happened to Dr Robert Watson, an eminent climatologist who had been chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and whose reappointment was opposed by ExxonMobil.¹⁰

A second strategy is the distortion and suppression of scientific information. Some examples, such as a statement by President Bush that over 60 useable stem cell lines already existed were simply wrong.¹¹ Others involved a highly selective use of evidence, disregarding anything that did not support the administration’s policy. Thus, in an example reminiscent of the tobacco industry’s distortions of the consensus on the health effects of passive smoking,¹² the National Cancer Institute suggested that contrary evidence had equal weight in the

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debate about the now disproved suggestion of a link between abortion and breast cancer.¹³ Finally, in a few cases, reports that were deemed unhelpful, such as one on the options for tackling greenhouse gases, where the research was simply blocked.¹⁴

The third strategy was to interfere with externally-funded scientific research. Researchers applying to the NIH have been advised by programme officers that applications for funding containing certain words such as 'gay' can expect extra scrutiny,¹⁵ a concern accentuated by the revelation that a staff member from the House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources has requested details of all NIH funded HIV prevention studies at the University of California at San Francisco.¹⁶

Research, such as an EPA analysis on air pollution, that might have found evidence that would be unhelpful to the administration and its corporate supporters was blocked by the Administration. Methodologies of programme assessment may be changed; for example, measures such as actual pregnancy rates and changes in sexual behaviour have been discarded by the Department of Health and Human Services in favour of measurements of changes in attitudes when assessing sex education programmes, even though it is known that attitudinal change does not predict behavioural change.¹⁷ The intent in this particular case appears to have been to boost the apparent effectiveness of programmes based solely on abstinence and to ignore success based on other means of preventing pregnancy. This interpretation is supported by the way in which a CDC web site entitled 'Programs that work', which listed interventions for which there was solid evidence and which cited only comprehensive, and not abstinence-only programmes, has been withdrawn.¹⁸

Cynics might contend that such actions are not new and that powerful interests, most notably tobacco and oil companies, have long sought to distort scientific evidence in the USA.¹⁹ Their efforts have, however, often been countered by the Federal agencies whose independence is now coming under attack and by politicians of all political persuasions who recognised the importance of receiving impartial advice. For example, the current president's father, George Bush senior went on record in 1990 to say how 'Now, more than ever ... government relies on the impartial perspective of science for guidance'.²⁰ Now members of previous administrations, of both political parties, are arguing that the scale of distortion is unprecedented, as is its degree of official endorsement. For example, writing about global warming, the head of the EPA under President Nixon wrote that 'I can state categorically that there never was such White House intrusion into the business of the EPA during my tenure'.²¹ The Waxman report concludes that 'These actions go well beyond the traditional influence that Presidents are permitted to wield at federal agencies and compromise the integrity of scientific policymaking'.³

The current American policy is dangerous for many reasons. Most obviously, it will lead to policies being

implemented that are simply wrong, with potential adverse consequences for human health. The history of the twentieth century provides many examples.²² But equally worrying is its impact on public trust. While the situation in the United Kingdom is nothing like that in the United States, politicians tainted by the distortion of evidence on subjects such as BSE²³ and the war in Iraq face difficulties persuading a sceptical population of the safety of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine.²⁴ Such scepticism creates opportunities for those peddling views that have no scientific basis and which may, covertly, be advancing vested interests.

The issues raised in this report are, primarily, a matter for the American people and their elected representatives. But they are not solely an American matter.¹⁶ The reputations of these agencies for scientific rigour and independence have ensured that their findings have had an impact worldwide and the information they have produced has been a major contribution by the United States that Europe can ill afford to lose. Furthermore the policies pursued by the United States based on a distorted scientific base, in areas such as environmental protection and defence, have implications for everyone, wherever they live in the world. For these reasons scientists and policy-makers everywhere have an interest in supporting those American scientists who have courageously spoken out against these abuses.

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Thank you

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