

PETER SAUNDERS

## Science versus Democracy?

*Professor Peter Saunders uncovers some uncomfortable truths about those who oppose democracy in science*

Earlier this year, ISIS was sent some free tickets to a "Westminster Fringe Debate", sponsored by the Stockholm Network and the *Economist* magazine. The motion for debate was "Democratisation of science would not be in the public interest", and a note on the invitations explained what the organisers had in mind:

"Science is driven by curiosity. Would any attempt to put that under greater public scrutiny deaden scientific inquiry or must scientists now come to terms with the fears and priorities of society at large? And is public accountability a meaningful concept in science? Scientists may not know what they are going to discover when they start experimenting or to what use it may ultimately be put. Are the public qualified to determine the priorities of scientific research? Is that untrammelled freedom for science out of date and dangerous?"

That made us more than a bit suspicious as it sounded like someone setting up a straw man so it could be knocked down. Scientists are driven by curiosity, but they are also driven by ambition, profit, by a burning desire to benefit humankind, and other motives good and bad. Above all, doing science costs money, which means that the priorities are inevitably influenced, and in far too many cases actually set, by whoever controls the funding.

So when we speak about the democratisation of science, we do not mean allowing influences from outside science to determine research priorities. That already happens. The question is who does the influencing. Should it be just business, industry and the large foundations, or can the rest of us ordinary citizens have a say as well?

We were not surprised to find Lord Taverne opposing democracy in science (see Box) but we were dismayed to find the Chief Executive of the UK Medical Research Council (MRC), Colin Blakemore, on the same side.

### **Lord Dick Taverne and Sense About Science ([www.GMWatch.org](http://www.GMWatch.org))**

Lord Dick Taverne chairs the pro-GM lobby group the Association of Sense about Science, and is author of *The March of Unreason* (2005), a book attacking the environmental movement for being anti-GM and anti-science. He himself has no background in science, which may be why he has been championing biotechnology as though that's all there is to science.

Sense about Science, set up in 2002 ahead of the UK's public debate on the commercial growing of GM crop, promotes its pro-GM views to peers, MPs and the media; its numerous funders include corporations, institutes and individuals with interests in biotech.

Does Blakemore believe there are no important influences from outside science that determine the priorities for research? The very existence of a separate funding agency with money earmarked for medical research is proof of that. Or does he believe only that the public should be excluded? We put those questions to him during the discussion but were left unclear as to exactly where he stands.

Blakemore argued that Crick and Watson would not have been able to do their work if the public had been able to direct their research. He had to be reminded that while this was hypothetical, history tells us that they certainly wouldn't have been allowed to do it if the MRC, the body he now heads, had known what they were up to. Fortunately, the MRC didn't find out until it was too late. Against the motion were Ian Gibson MP, the chair of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, and Daniel Glaser, a neuroscientist at University College London and Scientist in Residence at the Institute for Contemporary Arts. They put the case for democracy well, but to our astonishment, the motion was carried; possibly because the audience was not exactly a random sample of the population. So we decided to look into it.

It turns out that the Stockholm Network, which co-sponsored the debate, describes itself as "a network of 120 market-oriented think tanks in Europe and further afield." It is listed on the home page of a larger network, the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, an American organisation based near Washington. Atlas "brings freedom to the world by helping develop and strengthen a network of market-oriented think tanks that spans the globe," and its vision is, "To achieve a society of free and responsible individuals, based on property rights, limited government under the rule of law, and the market order."

One of Atlas' major activities is its Templeton Freedom Awards Program, which aims to promote the advance of economic freedom and "the virtues that support successful capitalist economies". The awards are funded by the John Templeton Foundation that also spends a lot of money supporting research into connections between religion and science. You may have seen the recent announcement of a \$2 million initial grant for a centre at Oxford, headed by Susan Greenfield, to explore the physiological basis of beliefs; one of its first projects will be an investigation into whether people cope with pain differently depending on their faith.

I don't doubt that some scientists are genuinely interested in such questions; different scientists are interested in many different things. But the reason this research is going ahead when other projects are not is that the directors of a wealthy foundation want it done. Are people who happen to have a lot of money qualified to determine the priorities of scientific research? Even if you think they are, does that count as untrammelled freedom for the scientist?

Science can't help but be influenced by the society in which it is done. This influence can be democratic, with public participation in setting priorities, or it can be the preserve of small, powerful groups. It is perhaps not surprising that those who want society to be based on property rights and the market should be opposed to democracy in science as well.

To help democratise science, please endorse the Independent Science Panel's Comment to the European Commission. <http://www.i-sis.org.uk/ISPF7.php>.

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