

## **The role of UK Government in PUS: Education and promotion while keeping science advice in expert hands**

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### **Introduction**

Promotionalism, “spin” and “market research” are sometimes difficult to decouple from genuine public consultation and engagement in the UK; much of the controversy surrounding UK Government PUS activities stems from differences in perspective over the actual character and utility of these initiatives. Educational and other “deficit model” modes of science communication predominate in the British PUS movement; these are covered in other sections of this report such as those devoted to universities, science festivals and museums. These mainstream PUS activities receive government funding, both directly and indirectly, and as such reflect explicit UK Government policy on the merits of promotional PUS. Government-run consultative exercises such as (Technology) Foresight<sup>1</sup> and the Public Consultation on Biotechnology, which are also covered elsewhere in this report, similarly reflect Government policies and priorities as well as those of the people and organisations being consulted. The role of the UK Government in defining and in supporting these activities ranges from passive sponsorship to active execution.

This section focuses on the PUS initiatives of Government bodies themselves, including the scientific Research Councils. Much of the material on the Research Councils is drawn from Pearson (2001)<sup>2</sup>; that on public dialogue from Kass (2001)<sup>3</sup>. To place these activities into context, it is useful to consider the extent to which they are educational or promotional in character (ie deficit model) or genuinely consultative (ie democratic), and the extent to which the Government plays an active vs. a passive role.

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<sup>1</sup> The Technology Foresight exercise that began in 1993 was intended to bring generators of new knowledge together with knowledge users to discuss national priorities for innovation support. Technology Foresight did not include a significant element of public consultation, and its producer/marketing/expert-led character was subsequently felt inadequate; the next exercise dropped the word “Technology” and expanded stakeholder representation in an effort to extend the consultation to a broader constituency.

<sup>2</sup> Gillian Pearson, “The participation of scientists in public understanding of science activities: the policy and practice of the U.K. Research Councils”, *Public Understanding of Science*, Vol. 10 (2001) 121-137.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Kass, “Open Channels: Public dialogue in science and technology”, *Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology report No. 153*, March 2001.

## Central Government

Until little more than a decade ago, consultations by the UK Government were conducted under strict adherence to the Official Secrets Act and were by definition inaccessible to the public. They were characterised by an odd mixture of expert-led advice and a culture of amateurism (closely associated with an ethos within the Civil Service that considered in-house expertise susceptible to bias). Advisory groups met in secret and delivered advice to Government in secret. It was not until the 1970s that the Government began to publish reports based on the recommendations of scientific advisory committees, where they could then be examined and challenged by other experts or by the public. By and large, these reports were not widely circulated and were relatively uncontroversial. Public access and public criticism were initially limited.

Gradually, however, a climate of openness and transparency in government took hold, accelerating in the 1990s, and with it the emergence of scientific advisory mechanisms from the shadows<sup>4</sup>. With this emergence, however, came controversy, culminating in the BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy or “mad cow”) crisis of 1996. Government assurances about the safety of British beef appeared to be contradicted by a statement by the British Health Secretary that a cluster of CJD cases (Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, the “human equivalent” of BSE) were “most likely ... linked to exposure to BSE” (quoted in Gregory and Miller, (1998), p.177).

Public confidence in scientific advisory system and in the reliability of expert advice collapsed, triggering a spontaneous consumer boycott of British beef that was highly damaging to the industry. Jasanoff (1997)<sup>5</sup> observed that the extent of scientific uncertainty over BSE coupled with the extent of public debate led to a situation in which “the lay public was almost as well positioned as the experts to make sensible decisions about how to avoid the risk of BSE”. This was clearly a profound challenge not only to the authority of the scientific advisory system but to the authority of Government itself, with questions raised over its capacity to protect public health and safety.

In the aftermath of the BSE crisis, and with the coming to power of New Labour in 1997, public consultation by the UK Government began to flower; S&T related issues prominent amongst those under consideration. Whether this was undertaken in order to elicit public input or to provide public reassurance cannot be established definitively, but a clear separation continues to be maintained in the UK between citizen consultation exercises and expert advisory processes that are embedded into policymaking processes. One illustration

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, a paper by Sir Robert May, “A Note by the Chief Scientific Adviser,” Office of Science & Technology, March 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Sheila Jasanoff, “Civilization and madness: the great BSE scare of 1996”, *Public Understanding of Science*, Vol. 6, July 1997, 221-232.

of this is that the Kass/POST report on public dialogue in S&T (2001) was released on the very same day as the House of Commons Report on the Scientific Advisory System<sup>6</sup>, in separate launch events (during national Science Week).

This, then, sets the context for our review and critique of public consultation/PUS activities by the UK Government over the past decade.

The first major public S&T-related consultation of the UK public by the UK Government was launched in 1992, by William Waldegrave, then Cabinet Minister under Margaret Thatcher, who was responsible for the newly-constituted Office of Science and Technology (OST, located within the Cabinet Office, and subsequently moved to the Department of Trade and Industry. This was a far-reaching, open process in which scientific bodies, universities, social groups, industry, professional associations, research entities of any type, and individuals, were invited to give their advice on the future direction of British science policy. Anyone could participate, and OST reported that it had received more than 800 submissions. The resulting report laid out a comprehensive strategy for Science, Engineering and Technology and how the Government's policies and objectives could contribute to the UK economy and to the quality of life.<sup>7</sup> Although many organisations (and some individuals) published their own views, the Government did not publish the evidence it had received, and according to sources familiar with OST, there was such a volume of evidence that not all of it was read.

A main outcome of this consultation served to reinforce the Government's contentions that science needed stronger linkages to industry, through a variety of means, in order to enhance wealth creation (and quality of life, although this always took a back seat to the economic aims). Was this exercise done to legitimise a pre-existing Government view, or was it a legitimate consultative process that allowed democratic shaping of national policies? Opinion differs.

More recent public consultations raise similar questions. A major initiative was the Cabinet Office's People's Panel, a sample constructed in 1998 which comprised 5,000 members of the British public with a profile representative of the population as a whole, using standard demographic categories such as age, gender and region. This Panel was constituted as a resource which could be engaged in different types of consultation, from focus groups to surveys, some of which relate to science. The consultation exercise on public attitudes towards the biosciences, perhaps the most significant example of this, is covered elsewhere in this report. It is worth mentioning here, however, that opinions of the nature of this consultation varied, with some activities seen more as market research conducted

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<sup>6</sup> UK House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, "The Scientific Advisory System", Report HC 257, The Stationery Office Ltd., London, 12 March 2001.

<sup>7</sup> "Realising Our Potential: A Strategy for Science, Engineering and Technology", May 1993, HMSO, London.

under firm Government control than as a democratic process in which participants had meaningful influence over the outcome (Irwin, 2001).

This type of public consultation at the level of Central Government remains relatively unusual, the Government's strategy being more focused on extending the more traditional consultation tools by putting discussion documents on line (at [www.ukonline.gov.uk](http://www.ukonline.gov.uk)). Nevertheless, the Cabinet Office has developed guidelines on Government use of public consultation, and it used the results of an online consultation in the preparation of new guidelines on scientific advice (need reference!). More detailed discussion of this mode of public consultation is covered in another part of this report. Guidelines on public consultation have also been produced by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), aimed both at local authorities and concerning environmental risks. DETR has set up a Chemicals Stakeholder Forum as an advisory body on chemicals policy, risk assessment and regulatory issues. Both the Department of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food are considering participatory dialogue as a way to address public concerns over food safety. An interdepartmental liaison group on risk assessment, drawn from a number of Government Ministries and agencies, recommended a greater role for public dialogue in all stages of risk assessment, from the identification of potential risks to the development of regulatory controls.

### **Government agencies, commissions and advisory bodies**

Three official bodies set up by the UK Government since the BSE and GMO controversies in the 1990s have a specific remit to include public consultation in their decision-making processes:

- The Food Standards Agency
- The Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission
- The Human Genetics Commission

In all three cases, science and the biosciences in particular are central to the areas for which these bodies are responsible.

The Food Standards Agency has an exceptionally clear commitment to "ensure that all relevant parties are given the opportunity and, whenever possible, the time to make their views known, including representatives of those affected by any proposed activity and the public." (FSA, quoted in Kass, p. 26). The Human Genetics Commission used the People's Panel to conduct a consultation on public attitudes towards human genetic information, and

set up a Public Involvement in Genetics Sub-Group to consider various options for public consultation, such as public meetings, internet discussion groups, focus groups and citizens' juries.

## **UK Parliament**

The "Mother of Parliaments" is of course the most prominent and influential form of lay citizen involvement in deliberating on S&T-related issues and shaping national policies. Under New Labour, efforts to improve the representational composition of the House of Commons was most visible in the election of record numbers of women as Members of Parliament; reforms to the House of Lords aim to diminish hereditary membership while broadening the basis for nomination and selection of new members. However, the Parliament has relatively more internal expertise than the public at large. The House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology includes a number of highly distinguished scientists; the House of Commons Select Committee too has impressive expertise in science, technology and medicine amongst its membership.

In addition to the technology assessment studies performed by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), the Parliament receives advice through the "usual channels", inviting expert witnesses to give evidence, reading and responding to constituent mail and lobby groups, and accepting public petitions. More recently, the Parliament has been experimenting with electronic discussion groups, initially in such self-referential areas as electronic democracy and mechanisms for public consultation in S&T.

## **UK Regions, Local Government and Health Authorities**

The new Scottish Parliament is a strong proponent of teledemocracy, allowing for example the submission of petitions electronically through its Website. The devolved Scottish Executive maintains a Website through which the public can access and comment upon consultation documents, and hosts electronic discussion fora on topics such as services for those with learning disabilities. The Welsh Assembly has implemented a moderated electronic discussion forum to augment more traditional forms of interaction with the public. A Civic Forum in Northern Ireland, comprising representatives of a highly diverse set of social groups, has been established as a consultative group on social, cultural and economic issues, providing advice to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

It is at local level, and within health authorities in particular, that public consultation in the UK is at its most highly developed and widespread. By 1997, over 40 local authorities had used citizens' panels. It is, however, in the healthcare sector that some of the most sophisticated S&T-related public consultations have occurred. One such example was a consultation of disabled users of health services in the Rochdale area (near Manchester), in which blind, deaf and disabled representatives of the user community served on the Steering Group defining the content of the study, selecting the contractors, and advising on the study progress, interpreting the data, and drawing conclusions<sup>8</sup>. Although the purpose of the exercise was to improve healthcare delivery, the Steering Group took a very broad view of what was required to do so, and addressed highly technological questions such as advanced communications and mobility aids.

## **Research Councils**

A call to scientists to engage in PUS concluded the Bodmer report of 1985<sup>9</sup>, "Learn to communicate with the public, be willing to do so and consider it your duty to do so."

Ten years later, a committee chaired by Sir Arnold Wolfendale reinforced this by stating "Scientists, engineers and research students in receipt of public funds have a duty to explain their work to the general public," (quoted in Pearson, 2001). These appeals to civic duty undoubtedly resonated with the scientific community and stimulated the PUS movement in Britain, but duty became more formalised and less voluntary as both strings and incentives were attached to Research Council funding.

Following the restructuring of the Research Councils called for in the White Paper of 1993, the engineering, physical and life sciences were given a remit to promote the Public Understanding of Science in their respective areas. This mission was incorporated into their respective charters and led to a great number and variety of activities, much of it sponsored by small grants schemes aimed at getting scientists to engage in PUS projects. All five of the "hard" science and engineering Research Councils require their grant holders to participate in PUS activities, and to report on what they have done.

All of the Research Councils either operate their own PUS training schemes or provide sponsorship for scientists to undertake training in science communication. While they typically spend about a quarter of 1% of their respective budgets on PUS activities, the total

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<sup>8</sup> Public Health Resource Centre, Rochdale, "Needs Assessment of Rochdale Residents (aged 16 - 60) with Physical Disabilities and Sensory Impairments", Final Report, February 1995.

<sup>9</sup> The Royal Society, "The Public Understanding of Science", 1985.

Research Council spending on PUS in 1999 amounted to £2.8 million (Pearson, 2001). In that same year, the Research Councils employed a total of 25 full-time equivalent staff to administer their PUS programmes. All of the Research Councils operate PUS Websites, mainly targeted at children, and run activities for and produce publications for schools.

Three of the Research Councils require grant applicants to say how they will communicate their work to the public, and those receiving funding from a fourth are required to do the same. Upon completion of their grants, the awardees are required to report on what they have done.

The Economic and Social Research Council, not covered in the above discussion, takes a slightly different approach, encouraging grantholders to disseminate research results in the popular press and to engage with user groups in designing and conducting research. However, it most obviously manifests its commitment to PUS by sponsoring *research* on PUS. How does one communicate research on PUS to the public? This is where we leave the discussion!

## **Conclusion**

As this section has shown, there have been a great number of UK Government initiatives in promoting science (largely through the so-called “Science Base”, which is dominated by the Research Councils) and in promoting public dialogue on science-related issues through augmenting and innovating democratic processes at all levels of Government.

The main emphasis of the UK Central Government policy is relatively passive support of mainstream PUS activities through its sponsorship of PUS activities by NGOs, through the Research Councils and related bodies such as The Royal Society, and by its agencies (such as the National Physical Laboratory). Although interactivity is encouraged, the educational or deficit model approach clearly predominates.

In areas like Foresight, and in the biosciences consultation exercise, the UK Government has played a very active role. The extent to which these processes are genuinely open and democratic is disputed. Some parts of the biosciences exercise would appear to have been conducted in a considered, deliberative manner, although the uptake of the results of these consultations is not necessarily influential. Other parts of the biosciences “consultation” more closely resemble market research.

The focus group exercises undertaken by New Labour, which some have perceived as influential in shaping national policies, are welcomed by some but have also attracted criticism for being anti-democratic means to bypass legitimate representative government.

Certainly there is a preoccupation with news management or “spin” that permeates current British politics, especially with respect to New Labour.

During the 1990s, the surge in interest in public consultation and dialogue was closely associated with the “popularisation” of PUS through, *inter alia*, government-funded science centres and government-sponsored civic activities. By 2003, the shine may have started to go off much of the consultative activity, although the promotional activities seem to have become more institutionalised. At the same time, following a two-decade decline in public funding of science, it has “bottomed out” and even started to recover.

Has the post-BSE, New Labour era ushered in new democratic tools related to PUS that are likely to withstand the test of time, or is the current wave of enthusiasm for public consultation a passing fancy? There is every indication that the mainstream scientific advisory system remains intact in terms of its expert orientation and control, and that the great bulk of Government-sponsored or organised PUS activities are conducted according to standard educational/deficit thinking. However, there has been an indisputable sea change in recognising the importance of science-related communication through direct links between the Government and its supporting bodies with the public. Whether this continues to develop into robust and lasting democratic development or becomes marginalised remains to be seen.